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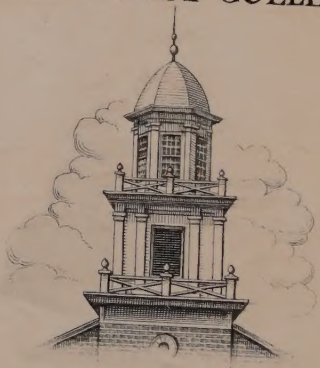

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Alice Gerstenberg

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Short Plays by

ALICE GERSTENBERG

AUTHOR OF "OVERTONES," "THE POT BOILER" "FOURTEEN," ETC.

WITH A PREFACE BY

ALEXANDER DEAN

OF THE YALE UNIVERSITY THEATRE

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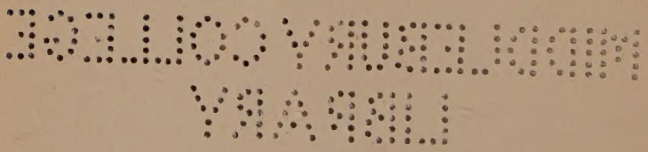

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

MY MOTHER

WHOSE MIND AND CHARM OF COMRADESHIP
BEAUTY OF PERSON AND COURAGEOUS FAITH
ARE A CONSTANT INSPIRATION

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ALICE GERSTENBERG

A BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE IN THE FORM OF A COMPOSITE LETTER TO THE DRAMA CLUBS OF AMERICA, BY ALEXANDER DEAN OF THE YALE UNIVERSITY THEATRE

My dear Mrs. ———

In many respects you have called upon the wrong person for assistance in preparing your Drama Club lecture on Alice Gerstenberg. I write "wrong" because she has been such a good and helpful friend that I can't but be prejudiced; and further, as I review impersonally the events of her life and my impressions of her, one so supports the other that any brief summary of her works and her accomplishments is certain to appear biased. I shall endeavor, however, to be impersonal in recalling for your talk a few of the outstanding events of her career.

Granddaughter of Chicago pioneers on both sides of the house, Alice Gerstenberg was born in that city. The daughter of Erich and Julia Gerstenberg, she inherited a capacity for endurance from her father, and a love of the theatre from her mother, in whom it had been denied an expression. She has spent most of her life in Chicago and has maintained an intense loyalty to it. She was educated at the Kirkland School and at Bryn Mawr College. She has travelled extensively on this continent and in Europe.

Her early literary expression took form in two novels, *Unquenched Fire* and *The Conscience of Sarah Platt;* but the novel technique intrigued her less than the dramatic, and she next turned to a collection of

college plays for girls, *A Little World. Captain Joe,* in this volume, was written into a longer version and as such was produced by the graduating class of the Sargent Dramatic School at the Empire Theatre, New York. She at once decided that her energy should be spent in the field of playwriting.

Her next major dramatic achievement was the well-known stage version of *Alice in Wonderland.* This play was first produced professionally with Vivian Tobin as "Alice," with music by Eric Delamarter, and scenery by William Penhallow Henderson. It was directed by W. H. Gilmore and backed by Aline Barnsdall and Arthur Bissell. It opened at the Fine Arts Theatre, Chicago, in 1915 and then played at the Booth Theatre in New York. Later it was produced by Henry Jewett in Boston. It was published in one volume with colored drawings of the players, republished in two other compilations of plays for children, and in 1929 was issued in single copy form. At the time of its production in New York, Clayton Hamilton wrote in *Vogue:* "To make a stage-version of the two classics of Lewis Carroll is a task that requires the most delicate literary tact. Miss Gerstenberg has performed the feat successfully. She has deleted little that the public misses with regret, and she has resisted the temptation to add anything for which there is no warrant in the master's text." The general acclaim was unanimous and this version is the accepted standard adaptation of the classic. Its production by the Little Theatres, Junior League Players and Children's Theatres is constant.

Her next play, *Overtones,* was first produced by the Washington Square Players at the Bandbox Theatre, New York, under the direction of Edward Goodman in

1915, and then played by Helene Lackaye on both the Keith and the Orpheum circuits and later in London by Lily Langtry. Since then it has been republished in many compilations of important one-act plays and has been produced by the Little Theatres as frequently as any other one play. It was included in her volume *Ten One Act Plays* along with *The Pot Boiler, Fourteen, The Unseen, Hearts, He Said and She Said, The Buffer, Beyond,* and *Attuned.* The success of *Overtones, The Pot Boiler,* and *Fourteen* placed Miss Gerstenberg in a distinguished class by herself. No other American playwright has written any three one-act plays which have been produced as frequently as these.

Overtones in a three-act version subsequently was produced under the author's direction by experienced amateurs at Powers Theatre, Chicago, in 1922 and has recently been published.

Her next volume to be printed was *Four Plays for Four Women* which contains her favorite play, *Ever Young.*

In her present volume she has included four plays created around a most original idea. *Facing Fact, The Puppeteer, Rhythm,* and *The Menu* were written to be played in homes, using the fire-place, the staircase, the davenport, and the bay window for settings although there is no handicap for their production on a stage. She felt that such plays given without much expense in any home large enough to seat an audience could be the means of raising money in many communities seeking funds to found a Little Theatre.

Miss Gerstenberg has also dramatized *The Land of Don't Want To* from the book by Lilian Bell. It was first produced by the Chicago Junior League with music by Edith Lobdell Reid. For their 1929 Christmas

production, Henry Jewett's Repertory Company of Boston gave the first performance of her very recent adaptation of Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies.*

One would think upon perusing this partial list of writings and upon being told that the complete list was too long to enumerate here that Miss Gerstenberg had devoted every minute of her life to her own work. That is far from the truth. In fact I consider her enthusiastic and unselfish promotion of dramatic activities in Chicago a complete and distinct achievement in itself.

When Maurice Browne founded the Little Theatre in Chicago, an experiment which has assumed historical prominence with the passing of years, she was one of the original active members. Her creation of the part of Mrs. Dyer in the first production of *Joint Owners in Spain* by Alice Brown brought her distinguished commendation, this time as an actress.

In 1921 she founded, with Miss Annette Washburne, a lasting monument to her vision, The Chicago Junior League Theatre for Children. For two years she was its director and succeeded in putting it on such a secure foundation that it functions today as one of the outstanding dramatic organizations of that city. It has been a real accomplishment of growing worth. Today all over the country the Junior Leagues, following this model, are operating Children's Theatres which are valuable influences in their communities. Appropriately enough many of them are beginning their enterprises with Alice Gerstenberg's dramatization of *Alice in Wonderland.*

The following year she founded The Playwrights Theatre of Chicago which has existed for the purpose of assisting the playwright. When not actively en-

gaged in rehearsal for public production she has directed readings and informal performances of new scripts for criticism by members. The Playwrights Theatre with Miss Gerstenberg as its active leader has rendered an important service to the creative dramatic writers of its community.

As if her attention to these two enterprises were not sufficient for any one person, she has engaged for many years in the numerous activities of drama life in Chicago. From the days of the Players' Workshop, in the studios of Anna Morgan and Grace Hickox, to the more recent productions by the Arts Club and the Romany Club, she has wholeheartedly urged the newer playwright to create by furnishing him an opportunity for the production of his creation.

In other ways, too, she has been actively identified with the following Chicago clubs: Arts Club, Junior League, Society of Midland Authors, Bryn Mawr College Club, Cordon Club, Woman's Athletic Club, Drama League, Romany Club, College Club, The Little Room, The 30 Club, and the Casino Club.

Now you see, in trying to be impersonal, I have given you little more than an animated account from "Who's Who" and that is not fair to Miss Gerstenberg. What is behind all this creation and accomplishment? What you shall have is not a photograph but a portrait that will give your club a fairer picture, one that contains my impression and explanation of the character beneath the external likeness.

In her writings her most outstanding personal characteristic manifests itself in her ability to appreciate the laughter of life. Situations that are basically tragic are pictured in the vein of comedy. Characters in conflict are humorous. By this treatment she does

not underestimate the force of her idea, but by viewing her situations and characters ever with a sense of humor, she satirizes and thereby strengthens it. This treatment of situation and character is typical of the vivid way she faces life.

As a creative writer she has incorporated modern philosophy and psychology into original form. Her *Overtones* is one of the forerunners of modern American psychological dramas. In her three-act plays, *The Promise* and *Try Your Number*, she has developed her belief in interesting philosophical theories. She is keenly awake to new ideas and is quick to introduce them in dramatic form. Her originality reaches beyond the mere presentation of new ideas and unusual characters to her extremely varied technique. The structure of *Overtones* is distinctly original while *The Pot Boiler*, *Upstage*, and *Beyond* present an unusual form in a new usage.

Her sensitiveness to human life never permits her to be cruel, no matter how extraordinary her characters and observations may be. This keen sympathy for delicacy and beauty allows her to dramatize so remarkably such difficult works as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Water Babies*. In each case the reviewers have remarked on her ability to transcribe the essential spirit of the book by her wise and appreciative selection, and to create the transitional passages with the same sensitive style and mood of the original.

The amount of her achievements certainly arouses a curiosity as to the character motivation behind such a monument of hard work. I believe the reason why Miss Gerstenberg accomplishes so much is due to four basic characteristics: her unselfish love of people and drama, her fertile and varied imagination, her bound-

less enthusiasm and energy, and her joy and pleasure in constructive work.

Founding the Children's Theatre was an expression of her love for children and her love for drama. She wanted the children to enjoy what meant so much to her. In bringing the two together she gave concrete form to her fundamental nature. The Playwrights' Theatre expresses her humanitarian vision. She saw that in order to get potential writers to create in forms of drama, they must have the incentive of a possible production. Again she was successful in bringing together people and drama, the two interests for which she lives.

Her imagination is a peculiar combination of the artistic and the practical. The variety of the themes in her plays, the popular demands for the dramatizations, the success of her enterprises demonstrates this unusual trait. She is always ready with new plots for plays and plans for execution. Sometimes an occasion demands an idea; sometimes an idea calls for an occasion. The plays in this volume utilizing for settings the parts of a house are characteristic of her constant originality and of her practical expression of imagination.

So it has been in each one of her endless list of club activities. She has wholeheartedly pushed forward the production not only of her own plays but the works of others with a zest for creative service. The organizations and people with whom she has come in contact have constantly benefited from her untiring enthusiasm. Few there are who have not gained much of their strength from her.

Early in her life she discovered that she was one of those fortunate people for whom there is no disagree-

able thing called work. Her sense of work is so closely interwoven with the fun of accomplishment that it is only the latter which really exists. Her play has been her work; her work has been her play, and that accounts for the very long list of her achievements.

One cannot speak of Miss Gerstenberg without mentioning her devotion to her parents. Always she has been fortunate in their sympathy and support, in allowing her to follow her natural bent. She has realized what their constant co-operation and encouragement have meant to her. Their faith in her and her appreciation of their devotion have been a compelling force in her life.

Alice Gerstenberg is a splendid example to all of us who love the drama. In these times when the theatre is losing ground as a commercial undertaking it behooves all of us to keep it thriving in our communities and schools with performances by our own organizations and by support of the productions of other groups, by our drama reading clubs, by performances for children, and by interest in our local playwrights. When all of us who claim we love the drama will support our claim and make it manifest in constant activity as she has, then it will be a far greater and stronger art than it was in the heyday of its commercial existence.

It has been a great pleasure to answer your request. I sincerely hope this is the information you wanted and that your club will receive from this brief account of Miss Gerstenberg some inspiration to promote drama activity in your community. If I may ever be of further help to you, please feel free to call on me.

With every good wish, I am,

Cordially yours,

ALEXANDER DEAN

New Haven, June 1930

THE SETBACK

A ONE-ACT PLAY

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BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Was originally produced by the Feagin School of Dramatic Art, Carnegie Hall, New York City, under the direction of Harry Neville, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

JANET, *the hostess*.....*Janet Fortson*
CLYDE, *her step-son*.....*David Sullivan*
RHODA, *the "relict"*.....*Vivian Grau*
FRESIA, *the spinster*.....*Carol Mattice*

SCENE: The roof garden of a duplex on the sixtieth floor of an apartment building.

NOTE: the effect may be gained on any simple stage by changing the stage directions to suit the limitations. The pent-house entrance may be played back centre and the walls placed at left and right if space in the wings can only be attained that way, with the blue of sky being imagined off stage. The best way where space permits is to have a blue cyclorama backing with a high wall so that no-one will miss seeing the top of Clyde's ladder and the arrival of Clyde which gives the comic surprise finish. As the play depends upon the finish directors are advised to plan the end before starting rehearsals.

THE SETBACK

SCENE: *The open roof room of Janet Wareham's duplex apartment on the sixtieth floor. At back and left one sees nothing but blue sky over the stone wall. Down front at left and right there is a fragment of wall to give the suggestion that the audience side is also only sky and wall. At right is the entrance door into the pent-house. It is gaily painted and the roof room can be as extravagant as desired with weather proof furniture, shrubs, and awning umbrellas. A tea table stands centre with cakes, cigarettes, iced tea, and glasses of brilliant hue.*

JANET [*attractive in a summer afternoon gown, and without a hat, opens the door at right and comes out*]. Come out here, Rhoda, and see my roof room. If you can't sleep tonight all you have to do is to step out of your bedroom here and get romantic over the stars brocading the sky.

RHODA [*follows, very attractive in travelling suit and hat*]. How perfectly enchanting! *Too* marvelous! What a view! You didn't do it justice in your letters!

JANET. I wanted to surprise you!

RHODA. Surprise me! You certainly did. And marrying a *second* time! And to —

JANET. I know what you are going to say, "to a man so much older," but I'm thoroughly happy.

RHODA. And a step-mother to Clyde!

JANET. When you marry Clyde you'll be my step-daughter.

RHODA. I'm not going to marry him.

JANET. You do love him though, Rhoda?

RHODA. He's a dear, but I've been a widow long enough now to —

JANET. Please take him, and live near us. It brings back college days to see you again; you were always so much fun!

RHODA. Because *you* were such fun yourself, Janet. We did hit it off. But so much has happened since then. [*Leans over the wall at left.*] My! How high up we are! What floor did you say we were on?

JANET. The sixtieth.

RHODA. Looking *down* upon a church steeple. How can my soul remain humble when it no longer has to look *up* at church spires!

JANET. *You* don't have to bother about your soul.

RHODA. I do though. I am much worried about it.

JANET [*laughingly*]. You look it! Not in that Jean Patou model.

RHODA. It's Lucile Paray copied for $39.50.

JANET. Well, don't be so honest about it!

RHODA. But I have to be honest.

JANET. Yes, I remember, your conscience was a great stickler for exact truth. In fact, sometimes you overdid it. It made you popular with the class though. You always gave a square deal.

RHODA. What an amazing sight! Roofs, chimneys, millions of radio wires, there's a tank aerating water! rather pretty! And automobiles, like tin ones in a nursery, and people like animated dolls! If *they* look as small as that to *us*, *we* must look awfully small to God.

JANET. And as important as ants or bees.

RHODA. We certainly live in hives like bees; those huge apartment buildings! Every window, a bee hole! How crowded for space!

JANET. I hurried you up but when we go downstairs for dinner I'll show you how large a duplex apartment can really be. The living-room is below us [*points downward*] and it's very comfortable!

RHODA [*still glancing over the wall at left*]. What a jolly height to jump down from!

JANET [*with an involuntary gesture of catching hold of Rhoda's skirt to hold her*]. If you're one of those people who get dizzy I'll ball-and-chain you!

RHODA. Not dizzy exactly! But there *is* a fascination! Such an easy way to end it all!

JANET. Not quite so considerate, however, of the people you fall on.

RHODA. Oh, they'll see one coming. It would take some time going down that distance! From here it

would require scarcely any will power to take the fatal plunge! Other ways, taking poison, or pointing a gun, demand a certain amount of grit! But here, so easy, just step on the wall and Nature draws you down to the finish.

JANET. Don't talk that way, I don't like it.

RHODA. It would be rather wonderful to be poised a moment in space before falling into endless sleep. [*She starts to look over the wall at back but is prevented from doing so by the entrance of Clyde at right, her attention immediately directed toward him. She must never look over the wall at back.*]

CLYDE [*entering from right, very attractive in aviator's costume*]. Hello, *Rhoda!*

RHODA. Clyde!

CLYDE. You know, Janet, Rhoda holds me off when we're alone. She did last year before she sailed.

RHODA. What a handsome aviator!

CLYDE. You don't mind kissing me now in the presence of my mother, do you? [*Kisses her.*]

RHODA [*glowing with affection for him*]. What a son to inherit, Janet! all grown up, brave, and stunning!

CLYDE. Couldn't I be just as grown up and the rest of it as a husband? I ask you Janet!

JANET. You are meant for each other, you darlings!

RHODA [*sighs*]. Oh! he must marry some sweet young girl—

CLYDE. It is your *duty* to protect me from Fresia.

RHODA [*surprised*]. Fresia! Not our Fresia?

JANET. There is only one Fresia and still unmarried.

RHODA. Why shouldn't she be? At college she vowed she'd never even kiss her fiance until the church had united them.

CLYDE [*scornfully*]. I'm not trying to make her break that vow.

JANET. She's amusing though, always was.

RHODA. Oh, yes, we liked her!

CLYDE. She has a mean streak which you women don't see. Or else time has developed it.

RHODA. She was clever at getting marks, give her a chance at love, Clyde.

CLYDE. Janet, why does Rhoda turn me down?

JANET. We'll keep her here, a prisoner, until she capitulates!

RHODA. I tell you I'm not the right woman for Clyde.

JANET. Bide your time, son. Rhoda has the most beautiful character of anyone I know. No more generous, sympathetic, interesting person can ever be made! Yet not dull and goody-goody!

RHODA [*wistfully*]. That's it, I'm not goody-goody!

JANET. She's just being amusing, holding you off a while. I'll discreetly withdraw to attend to some household duties and give you the field! [*Exit right.*]

RHODA. So rejuvenating to see Janet again! Brings back college days!

CLYDE. Rhoda, I went into aviation to forget you or to kill myself and I have succeeded in neither. Providence has spared me through some amazing accidents.

RHODA. Strange for you to say that. Providence has spared me too in amazing ways. I haven't been able to understand it.

CLYDE. It was cruel of you to go to Europe just when I thought you — why did you leave me —

RHODA. Oh, my dear, I do love you, but —

CLYDE [*embraces her*]. Then we can settle it.

RHODA. But I haven't changed my mind, I just can't marry you!

CLYDE. Give me a valid reason. Is there some other man?

RHODA [*brushing his hair back and looking seriously into his eyes*]. Dear, I went into a little churchyard in Connecticut last fall before I sailed, and there on an old sunken mossgreen stone I read, "Rhoda, the relict of" — and it mentioned the names of her two husbands whom she had survived to the age of seventy-three. Strange word to use "relict" —

CLYDE. A polite term for widow —

RHODA. Sounds more like a "leftover."

CLYDE. But what has that got to do with —

RHODA. Well, I am the relict of Roger Birley.

CLYDE. Of course, I know that.

RHODA. There were other quaint names for women on those tombstones — Sabrina, the comfort of; or Mersey, the consort of — strange names to use for wives! I never thought of myself as the consort of Roger and I'm not sure I was the comfort of —

CLYDE. You're rambling! All this has nothing to do with me.

RHODA. But how would *you* like to have on your tombstone, "Clyde Wareham, the husband of Rhoda, the relict of Birley!"

CLYDE. That capricious sense of humor, Rhoda! Stop talking with your tongue in cheek!

RHODA. It's all so splendid, giving your courage to this dangerous aviation job which must be done by the brave men for the sake of the progress of the world. It puts a glorifying halo around you! I am dazzled by the beauty of it, your fine spirit flying into the pure heavens!

CLYDE. Not so pure, when pea-soup fog masks visibility.

RHODA. That's it! I'm in a fog myself, Clyde, under a cloud, trying to see my way through; but every time I think I see the way, Providence laughs at me. It's very confusing.

CLYDE. If it's money troubles, father has a good head with advice.

RHODA. Not money, just my own mind. The Fates have been playing jokes with me; now they've got me

stumped! I don't know which way to turn; I'm *so* confused!

CLYDE. But if you would tell me and let —

JANET [*hurries in from right*]. Fresia is downstairs. I thought I'd warn you!

RHODA. Oh, let me change this hot suit before I see her. [*Exit right.*]

JANET. Thank me for your precious moment with Rhoda. I hope I scored.

CLYDE. There's something bothering Rhoda; I can't make it out.

JANET [*giving no indication whatsoever of the location of the setback*]. I'll help you bring her round. Now, *you* do something for *me*. The new plants have come for the setback garden off of the living-room below. [*Points downward in a casual way.*] I want it to look beautiful tonight after dinner when we go out there for our coffee. The gardener can't finish in time, unless you help him put the plants in place.

CLYDE. Does he know where you want them?

JANET. More or less. Use your own judgment. I forgot to tell him though that I want some of the vines above the living-room windows. You understand, above, to kill that bare space of brick.

CLYDE. But how can I reach so high?

JANET. Climb boy, climb! They've been painting in some of the apartments; the houseman can grab a ladder somewhere.

CLYDE. Right! I'll fix it swell, for Rhoda — and you, darling! [*Starts right.*]

FRESIA [*enters from right*]. Hello, Clyde! Janet! The maid sent me up.

JANET. What a pretty dress, Fresia, how do you keep yourself so crisp?

CLYDE. She tells them to stay crisp and she's so proper they obey her!

FRESIA. Yes, I do tell them to stay crisp. They said Burbank talked to his flowers and told them to grow just as you talk to your aeroplane and it flies.

CLYDE. But I don't talk to it.

FRESIA. You may not know it, but you do talk to it.

CLYDE. I don't.

FRESIA. You think about it mentally and that's talking to it.

CLYDE. I don't talk to it.

FRESIA. I say you do and you do.

CLYDE. But I won't have you saying —

JANET. Children! Stop it!

CLYDE. But she argues —

FRESIA [*laughingly*]. Just like a man. Don't you know that most women get married by saying to the man "marry me, marry me, marry me!"

CLYDE. A man would run a mile if he heard it.

FRESIA. But he doesn't hear it; a woman says it under her breath, "marry me, marry me, marry me."

CLYDE [*starts out right*]. Excuse me, I have to attend to something for Janet. [*Exit.*]

FRESIA [*moves her lips after him*]. Marry me, marry me, marry me!

JANET [*arranging iced tea at the table*]. If you treat Clyde like that you won't get him.

FRESIA. Oh, yes, I will, if *you'll* help me. Why should fate make me meet you at college, and why should you marry Mr. Wareham, if it wasn't going to be significant for *me* to meet Clyde that way?

JANET. Are you egotistical enough to believe that *my* marriage was made for *your* benefit?

FRESIA. Certainly. Why was I not married before? Because I was destined for Clyde!

JANET. That's optimism, if nothing else.

RHODA [*enters from right looking lovely in an afternoon gown, very soft in contrast to Fresia's stiff primness*]. Oh, Fresia, it's good to see you!

FRESIA. Don't kiss me!

JANET. I'm sure Rhoda's all right. What's the matter with *you*, Fresia?

FRESIA. Germs. I mean, it's dreadful how germs can be exchanged even by hand-shaking, or touching money. I always wash my hands — and I can't bear to touch cats without washing my hands afterwards.

RHODA [*lightly but puzzled*]. I hope your allusion to cats isn't personal.

FRESIA. We haven't met since that house party up at Crystal Lake, where you met Mr. Randall.

JANET [*pouring tea and offering cakes*]. Randall, who was he?

FRESIA. Oh, hasn't Rhoda told you about *that* conquest?

RHODA. I wish it had never happened.

FRESIA. You did lead him on.

RHODA. Nobody told me he was married, that his wife was ill. I liked him tremendously Jan; it was a year after Roger had died and I was terribly lonely. I have felt so guilty ever since —

JANET. Oh, yes, that old-fashioned conscience of yours.

RHODA. It was all a mistake. I was so unhappy I didn't want to live.

FRESIA. So she picked out a fine place in which to commit suicide! Had all the consolation of knowing she had tried and failed.

RHODA. I wouldn't have failed, if Fate hadn't laughed at me!

FRESIA. I bet you knew it all the time.

RHODA. I swear to you —

FRESIA. No-one believes anything else.

JANET. What is this all about?

FRESIA [*sarcastically*]. One day we were out in a row boat, in three row boats, to be exact. And as we were

gliding over a particular place in Crystal Lake where they said they'd never been able to measure bottom, Rhoda suddenly stood up and jumped overboard!

JANET. Rhoda!

RHODA [*seriously*]. I swear to you I was in such a mental state, so agonizingly unhappy, I just felt I had to sort of cleanse my soul.

FRESIA. All she accomplished was a splash over everybody. Of course every *man* in the party jumped in to save her. The oars floated off in all directions; we women in the boats were left quite helpless while gallantry galloped after Rhoda!

JANET [*laughingly*]. But how *silly!*

RHODA. I know it, *horrible* to be *ridiculous* when one meant to be heroic! I tell you the gods just wouldn't let me drown!

FRESIA. No, the gods purposely raised a sand bar just in time to let Rhoda and five men stand with their heads out of water like floating cannon balls!

JANET [*laughs*]. Oh, Rhoda! I'll say it isn't every suicide who *can* plan on having an island come up out of the sea in time to be a life saver!

FRESIA. You knew they were only joking when they had said it was so deep!

RHODA. But they said nobody had ever questioned the legend about the "fathomless depths where the Indian maid had drowned."

FRESIA [*caustically*]. Well, you'll have to try some other way of cleansing your soul!

JANET. Have a caramel, Fresia, and exhaust your spite on that!

RHODA. Of course I have a sense of humor myself. After having tried I was quite cheerful that it was not to be; but, I have a conscience that won't let go.

JANET. You are too hard on yourself. You always have been. Even Roger used to say you were too *scrupulously* honest. And if any husband ever considered his wife an angel, he considered you one. He said you had every possible charm and virtue, and humor besides. And he meant it, even after being married to you for ten years.

RHODA. All the more reason for me to repent my disloyalty to Roger by caring for Randall.

JANET. Roger would be the last to hold that up against you. You had to find *some* "Randall" after Roger's death because you are naturally a generous, affectionate nature and you are most yourself when radiating fondness for people. I like it. I'd rather have you *my* Rhoda, *glorified* by experiences, than stultified by narrow-lipped taboos!

RHODA. That's good of you, but it's a worldly statement, Janet.

JANET. According to past standards, perhaps, but really only a normal one. You know, one has a new perspective on life when one lives on the sixtieth floor, so close to the sky and its stars!

FRESIA. For instance! You can't make remarks like that unless you're *exact* about them!

JANET. What, for instance? Oh — well, picture to yourself a row of little old-fashioned houses, in Philadelphia, let us say. In the second-story window were little mirrors placed at an angle to let those in the house see what was taking place down the street. House-bound women used to sit in their upstairs windows making scandals for the neighborhood. When you live on the sixtieth floor there is no way of keeping track of the comings and goings of neighbors; the earth and all the poor humans that crawl upon it recede into a perspective made small by the sky!

FRESIA. I think living up here is making you *light headed!*

JANET [*looking over the wall down right front*]. No, clear minded. Down there they are bending over, carrying burdens, eyes to the ground, heads bowed in prayer perhaps. Up here, you can't pray with your head *down!* It's got to be *up!* Don't you feel a marvelous freedom?

FRESIA. You sound ready to jump overboard!

JANET. It *does* give a feeling that if one *did* decide to fly, one could just get up and do it like a bird. We will some day too.

FRESIA [*sarcastically*]. Individual rubber wings. Mercury in flight!

JANET. Why not? It is only our thoughts that anchor us!

RHODA [*has been listening in a rather wistful mood*]. But our thoughts are so confusing.

JANET. Yours will be wind-swept clear here in a week. Meanwhile, don't be too hard on Clyde.

FRESIA. Has Rhoda met Clyde?

JANET. Oh, yes, before she went to Europe. He wants to marry her!

FRESIA. *Marry* her! [*With scarce concealed anxiety.*] Oh, Janet, I had to skip lunch and I'm really hungry. Have you some bread and butter?

JANET [*rises with a curious, comprehending glance*]. Oh, yes, downstairs. I'll get you some. [*Turns at doorway right.*] Now don't squabble. After all, Fresia, I know lots of *other* men. They all get romantic up here. [*Exit.*]

FRESIA. See here, Rhoda, you're not going to interfere between Clyde and me.

RHODA. Are you sure of Clyde?

FERSIA. He's my destiny.

RHODA. Who proves it?

FRESIA. A fortune teller laid cards, said I would marry the third man I would be introduced to. Clyde was the third. And I got dizzy up here one day —

RHODA. Yes, it is terribly high. [*Walks to the wall, facing audience way down right, and gives the impression of looking down.*] It has a pull, this magnetism of the earth.

FRESIA. One feels it most, the first time. Later, one gets accustomed to it. I wasn't used to living high; when I fainted Clyde was right there to catch me in his arms.

RHODA. So that proves you are destined for Clyde?

FRESIA. There's another reason! I dreamt that Clyde would marry a woman of "unsullied soul"; "unsullied soul," those were the exact words, and you know Rhoda, I am still virtuous, which is more than can be said about you.

RHODA. You may sneer at my failure of ending life, but I tried it again another way, and again the Fates only turned to laugh at me!

FRESIA. Don't tell me another Atlantis sprang up to your rescue!

RHODA [*seriously*]. I was visiting friends, and seeing a bottle on a shelf labelled "Carbolic acid." I took it, closed my eyes and drank it down!

FRESIA. I suppose the fire department arrived in time with the stomach pump!

RHODA. No, the label *was* wrong. It was *gin!*

FRESIA. So this time even the Government helped the Fates to protect you! Your hosts must have been furious to see you intoxicated at such expense!

RHODA. I'm not so lacking in humor not to see the irony of it; I'm not happy, Fresia, in spite of it all. I repent most deeply. In fact, it's got hold of my mind. It's all very well for Janet to make general statements, but if she knew how far my affair went with Randall she wouldn't want me for Clyde; but I love Clyde. I went to Europe to try to forget him—

FRESIA. If you don't trump up some excuse, and leave this very afternoon, I'm going to tell him and Janet the

truth. I spared you before, but I won't spare you when you poach on my ground! You've had one husband and who knows how many lovers, it's my right now!

RHODA. But I told him I wouldn't marry him —

FRESIA. I don't want you around. He mustn't even see you. This is my game! Get your bags and leave at once! I'll go down and tell Janet you are leaving —

RHODA. But, Fresia, you're crazy — wait —

FRESIA. Maybe I'm just as crazy as you are but I'm fighting for *my* life and you have to go! Now I'll tell —

RHODA. But I'm a guest — I can't just leave — wait — tomorrow —

FRESIA [*cruelly*]. No! I didn't tell Janet *all* I knew about your affair with Randall and I haven't told Clyde, but if you spoil my chances with him, I'll leave no words unsaid to reveal to him —

RHODA. I promise — I mean it — Fresia — I'll do anything I can to help you marry him if you'll never tell him the truth about me! I couldn't bear it if he knew the truth!

FRESIA. And I'll tell him the whole truth, that if he married you he'd never be sure of you, you try to attract all men —

RHODA. I don't try, Fresia, I can't help it, I can't help it if they seem to —

FRESIA. Make me believe *that!* You women who make it a *business* of attracting them!

RHODA. But that's not the truth! I don't try! I can't help it! I didn't know Randall was married, there's never been anyone else —

FRESIA. I don't believe that, and you can't lie yourself out of this! There'll be many a black mark against you on Judgment Day!

RHODA. But you can't say that of me!

FRESIA. Oh, can't I? Well, I can tell it to Clyde and then when you —

RHODA [*grasping Fresia's arm imploringly*]. But you are making the truth worse than it is!

FRESIA [*drawing back primly*]. Don't touch me! I won't be contaminated by you!

RHODA [*emotionally moved*]. You aren't just, you aren't just! You don't understand! You have no human understanding! What shall I say? What can I do?

FRESIA. Get out at once! I won't have you around! Your part in this is finished!

RHODA. But if I leave now — suddenly, they will ask questions — they will —

FRESIA. Well, if you can't kill yourself out of my way, I'll have to throw you out!

RHODA. But Fresia! Wait! Tomorrow!

FRESIA. No, now! Now! *I'm* holding the whip hand *this* time! You'll find out that I am Fate *this* time! [*Hurries out right.*]

RHODA [*looks about desperately, beside herself with conflicting emotions*]. Oh, oh, he must not be told! Better to die letting him keep his faith in me! This *is* the last moment of my life! [*Shudders, closing her eyes as if shutting out the fear of the height of space in which she is going to fall. Then with a brave effort like one going to death, cries*] O — in this expiation of my sin, forgive me, and bless me for all the life beyond in the shelter of — everlasting arms! [*Dashes across the room, leaps upon a stone bench at back and then upon the wall to fling herself into space. One has all the feeling of the horror of the fall to come. At the exact moment the top of a ladder appears and Clyde arises from the other side, a pot of trailing vine in each hand. His hands outstretch at once for safety, drop the pots which smash, and clinch Rhoda in a life-saving grip. The two bodies waver on the wall. Janet and Fresia enter from right.*]

JANET [*shrieks in fear*]. What are you doing there!

FRESIA [*screams in rage*]. Clyde!

CLYDE [*being the stronger, with his arms firmly about her, brings Rhoda safely down into the room*]. Rhoda has decided to have me, I think.

RHODA [*in hysterical laughter and tears and clinging triumphantly to Clyde*]. I can't help it, Fresia! And nothing *you* can do can change it now! It just seems as if there's no escape for me from the embrace of *Fate!*

CURTAIN

MERE MAN

A ONE-ACT PLAY FOR FIVE WOMEN

COPYRIGHT 1929
BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Original production by the Feagin School of Dramatic Art, Carnegie Hall, New York City, March 1930, under the direction of Harry Neville with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

CORAL MARQUAND, *pianist*.....*Peggy McNamara*
MARY CHOATE, *lawyer*.....*Evelyn Greenhalgh*
HORTENSE EWING, *doctor*.....*Grace Tingue*
SUE VAN WAGENEN, *financial adviser*.....*Jane Markle*
ELIZABETH SLADE, *press agent*.....*Carmalyn McCann*

SCENE: Coral's apartment at midnight.

MERE MAN

SCENE: *Coral's apartment at midnight, entrance back centre. Mary, Hortense, Sue, and Bess, looking very smart in street clothes, very attractive and very mentally capable, are in earnest conversation, emotionally intense throughout. Mary and Hortense are inclined to masculine severity in their make-up. Mary is pacing up and down when the curtain rises. Hortense at right and Bess at left are examining a letter across a small table between them at left. Sue is seated on a couch at right and is smoking a cigarette with excited speed.*

BESS. *I* have never met a man I could not live without!

MARY. Coral must not marry this Trevor Ballin! She must never marry anyone.

HORTENSE. The man has impudence to imagine that one of the greatest pianists of the day will jeopardize her career for *him.*

BESS. And she's a fool to believe he loves her for herself alone!

SUE. That letter proves he is a fortune hunter. It would be too cruel to show it to her. Hide it, Bess, we'll have to argue her out of it!

MARY [*stops pacing to scrutinize the letter again*]. Let me look at it again, Bess. Incredible! [*Gives letter back to Bess and begins to pace again.*] He has no intention of giving up this other woman, even promises his marriage to Coral will not interefere with Rose!

BESS. How *can* a man want to marry one woman while he feels as he says he does about another.

HORTENSE. It's lucky this letter came into our hands in time!

SUE. Almost uncanny that it should fall into our hands at all. But Henry said Trevor was too intoxicated to remember he had dropped it.

HORTENSE. Poor Coral!

SUE. Henry says he can't bear to think of Coral marrying, of course Henry is really in love with Coral himself, but he knows *he's* never had a chance!

BESS. Henry is just jealous enough, I suppose, not to want anyone else to marry her. Well, we won't show her this unless we have to. [*Puts the letter back into her bag.*]

MARY. Why doesn't she come? I want to get it over with. Besides, I've got to read through some briefs before I go into court tomorrow.

SUE [*glancing at her watch*]. Midnight. I've got to be down at the bank early; I've an appointment with a widow whose estate I'm investing.

BESS. Don't boast about your early morning hours! We're taking on a new account from a canning factory, big advertising order to force you to buy okra.

MARY [*sinking into the couch at right*]. I suppose she is eating ravioli with him somewhere.

HORTENSE. And holding his hand across a little table. Oh, what a *fool* she is for wanting to give up a career like hers for a *mere* man!

MARY. Maybe Coral couldn't play Chopin as she does if she didn't have the romantic streak!

SUE. Even the critics admit she is superb!

HORTENSE [*takes up a clipping book from the table and glances through it*]. Extraordinary clippings! Even Cartway calls her "the great promise of what women can achieve as pianists" and you know how dour he usually is about everyone.

MARY. We *must* save her from herself for the public!

HORTENSE. This determination to marry is just a temporary emotional exhaust!

SUE. She'll have to get over it!

BESS. Her talent has no right to a private life, it belongs to the world!

SUE. We've all had our chances, and were wise enough to reject them!

BESS. When that magazine article came out calling us the "big five" who had achieved, thousands of married women envied us our bachelor freedom!

MARY. Why shouldn't they? Can you see *me*, a lawyer, asking a husband's consent? Not from any of the kind of men that *I* see coming up for jury service!

HORTENSE. It's pathetic what some women take!

MARY. Oh, you've heard women boast that they've captured three husbands! But, my dears, have you ever seen those three husbands? Of course, you haven't, you'd never even look at them!

HORTENSE [*reading from the clipping book*]. "Such genius is so precious that even the State should see to its protection."

MARY. Legal protection! We are here to protect the property of the State!

SUE. There's her key.

BESS. She'll be surprised.

HORTENSE. Don't frighten her.

[*The door opens back centre.*]

MARY. Don't be frightened. We're calling on you.

CORAL [*in luxurious gown and wrap enters, triumphantly happy, carrying flowers*]. Why, hello, hello, hello!

HORTENSE. Evidently you were a success tonight. You're late.

CORAL. Trevor took me to Giovanni's. I'm always hungry after playing.

SUE. Good house?

CORAL. Yes, even standing room!

BESS. Flowers as usual.

CORAL. Yes, too many. Hortense, I sent the rest down to your hospital.

HORTENSE. Thanks, they'll cheer up my waiting maternity cases.

CORAL [*takes Hortense's hand affectionately*]. Hortense, I hope to be one of your patients in a year or two.

HORTENSE. Your hands belong to the piano keys. There is no service to be demanded from them in the nursery.

CORAL. But I want children! Such dear little hands groping, have you ever felt a tiny one patting your cheek?

HORTENSE. I've had just as many voices tear my ears with screams!

CORAL [*retreats*]. Oh, don't talk like that! It makes you so unwomanly!

HORTENSE. This is no time for sentimentality! I don't approve of this idea of marriage!

CORAL [*goes to Mary as if for protection*]. Oh, oh, Mary, come to my defense!

MARY. That's why we're here at midnight. You sleep so late mornings! And we are so busy all day. This seemed to be the best time to thrash it out! We're here until breakfast unless you promise earlier to give up this Trevor Ballin!

CORAL [*retreats to Bess as if for protection*]. Oh, Mary, eloquent as you are in court, you're not going to make me change my mind. Tell them, Bess, how wonderful he is, you said so yourself when we first met him. You raved then about his brilliant mind.

BESS. Mind! but what about his pocket-book! You'll have to do the supporting! Just an every-day sort of plodder, thousands like him; what does it matter what they manage!

CORAL [*retreats to Sue*]. What *is* this? Are you all against me? Speak up for me, Sue, that I'm lucky to get him.

SUE. It's not easy to resist the magnetism of a man in love. To an extent it hypnotizes the woman, we've all gone through that! But we had to use common sense.

HORTENSE. And aren't we glad we did.

MARY. Yes, look at our bank accounts, our apartments, our freedom! We don't have to *marry* for a home, we make one! Oh, how it thrills me to come home at night to my adorable apartment and *not* to be met by a husband I would want to divorce!

CORAL [*retreats looking from one to the other beseechingly*]. Is this a plot? Why do you do this to me? My four best friends?

MARY. Each of us, separately, has tried to talk you out of this —

CORAL. No, you couldn't do it.

BESS. When you told me you were going to be married tomorrow —

HORTENSE [*glancing at her watch*]. To be exact — *today.*

CORAL. At high noon today. Trevor has two weeks vacation and can leave with me for my concert in Philadelphia tonight.

SUE. What kind of playing are you capable of with a husband on your hands?

CORAL [*triumphantly*]. Better than ever, for *sheer joy!*

MARY [*goes to Coral, puts her hand upon her shoulder and speaks with emotional earnestness*]. Coral, you're rushing into a catastrophe! We are your best friends fighting to save you! For your very life!

CORAL [*glowingly*]. Trevor is my whole life!

MARY. There are hundreds of Trevor Ballins! There is only one Coral Marquand!

CORAL. No, Mary, there is only one Trevor Ballin.

HORTENSE. Ten other men somewhere in the world are just as likely to please you!

CORAL. But Trevor is the *one* I happen to have met!

HORTENSE. Then forget him.

CORAL. I have tried to, but can't.

BESS. I thought that once about a man myself but I got over it! Now, when we're busy on a particularly important publicity campaign, electric washing machines or soap, I get so interested I forget men exist at all, romantically!

HORTENSE. Love isn't a woman's whole existence, any more than it is man's, when the woman has a real job to bother about.

SUE. Or a big game to play in business. She forgets just as men do.

BESS. You'll forget too. Professional success is a very real rival to a man.

CORAL [*her hands to her ears*]. Please, please, this isn't fair! Four against one!

HORTENSE. Do other men like him?

CORAL [*resentfully*]. Oh, I've investigated all that! His family, how highly he is thought of by his firm, why even his handwriting —

MARY. Now, my dear, don't tell me you've applied that fad to his love letters!

BESS. Cold-bloodedly taken his love letters —

CORAL. Under a magnifying glass, yes. You can't call that romantic?

SUE. Oh, reading handwriting at parties for fun! But —

HORTENSE. As if you would choose a husband through —

CORAL. Hortense, my dear Doctor, if you'd interpret the handwriting of your patients before they were ill you would know in advance they were getting ill. And Mary, if you knew more about the writing of crooks you'd never lose a case!

SUE. Can handwriting be proof?

CORAL [*eagerly draws a batch of letters out of a desk drawer*]. Certainly! Look at these letters from him.

SUE [*examining the letter Coral gives her*]. Rather scrawly. Not very literate!

CORAL [*giving another letter to Mary*]. Not academically spencerian you mean. Not conventionally imitative of early training. [*Giving another letter to*

Hortense.] It's original and that is what he is, an inventor at heart, bold, strong, creative, honest, tender. [*Giving another letter to Bess.*] See how evenly spaced between the lines in spite of the apparent surface scrawl and how well he gauges the use of the entire page. [*To all of them.*] No haphazard inventor, but well balanced even though he writes with a mind in action like a general slashing to the front.

MARY. A dominant type! [*Returns the letter to Coral.*]

CORAL. I couldn't be in love with him if he weren't, and that is the power he has over the men in the factory. They adore him in that research department! I don't understand all these mechanical devices they talk about; it's like a new, amusing language to me!

HORTENSE [*collecting the letters to put them back into the desk*]. Your career means mighty little to you.

CORAL. How can you say that when you know the years I have struggled to bring me where I am. I shall always play, music is a passion with me, but it never could make up to me for the loss of Trevor.

BESS. *I* am ashamed of you!

MARY. And *I* disappointed in you!

SUE. And *I*.

HORTENSE. And *I*.

CORAL. Is it shameful to confess this much? Are you jealous of me? Because I have found the greatest of all adventures?

HORTENSE. Take a lover if you must but do not marry!

CORAL. It wouldn't be the same. I want all the responsibilities that come with two people making their home together. I want the peace of a home.

SUE. Your own fireside, all that, we know the terms. Natural reaction on your part to bad meals on tour and sleeping in beds that are *not Simmons!*

BESS [*pacing up and down and speaking with emotional eloquence*]. Oh, you have been reading my daily advertising lingo about new furnaces, chemical foods, cleaners to lighten the housewife's burden! If you'd only picked a billionaire to send you on tour in his private car; but no, you must settle your wild fancy on a hired manager of inventors — Oh, take him as a lover!

CORAL. You're downright immoral!

HORTENSE [*shrugs her shoulders*]. Where one man gets a faithful wife, an entire public loses a faithless artist. Take a lover but don't —

MARY [*facing Coral and arguing emotionally*]. I tell you this marriage business is on the rocks! An artist like you has psychic forces which are scattered and weakened by the close vibrations of other people. A few months of sharing the same house and you'll be ready to kill him! We've had such cases of outraged individuality in court! And your legal rights — signing contracts with his permission — taking out insurance on *your* fingers so the damage money will be paid to *him* — Oh, you don't know how *legally* you will be involved!

HORTENSE [*emotionally as she too faces Coral*]. And with a child ill with fever, will you leave it for a concert, or will you force your frantic managers to appease an enraged public!

SUE [*emotionally as she goes to add her argument*]. And *economically!* If you heard the shocking tales I hear from women coming to the bank, how some of them skimp and save for pocket money because their pride is too wounded having to *ask him* week after week!

CORAL. Your sex antagonism doesn't make you fair to men!

MARY [*stops pacing*]. Not at all. I like men, some better than many women, but marrying them is a different matter. Until the laws of marriage have changed to suit women like us, it is not for us!

CORAL. You're jealous, every one of you, because I'm happy!

BESS. It is the *keeping* of your happiness that concerns us! You are too precious material to be dwarfed into a pattern of marriage cut for slave women!

HORTENSE. This passion doesn't last. In a year or so you'll be running to Mary to trump up a legal exit!

CORAL. You are making me very angry! Do you mind going and letting me have some rest? I shall be married at noon and I shall play in Philadelphia tonight.

[*There is a definite pause. The women exchange glances. Coral looks questioningly from one to the other.*]

BESS [*reluctantly takes the letter out of her bag and hands it to Coral*]. I hope this *letter* won't prevent

you from appearing before your public tonight although it may prevent your marriage this noon. We don't like to show this to you, Coral, but you force it!

CORAL. What's this?

MARY. A letter Trevor Ballin wrote to another girl — yesterday.

CORAL [*reads and grows a bit faint but controls herself*].

HORTENSE [*goes as if to support her*]. It's not contrary to man's nature to be interested in two at the same time. He probably loves you no less even if he thinks someone else —

SUE. Didn't he ever mention a girl by the name of Rose? Of course he wouldn't. She isn't making it easy for him to leave her for you.

BESS. So it won't really break his heart if you turn him down. This Rose will console him. *Your* conscience needn't bother you.

MARY. What a sacrifice you would be making confusing your career with marriage. You must be practical! We are the women who must be strong, who must resist our own weakness, who must pioneer to safeguard our spiritual freedom. You may want to be a slave, Coral, but you have no right to be!

CORAL [*with blazing eyes*]. This letter is a forgery!

SUE and MARY [*in astonishment*]. Impossible!

HORTENSE. How can it be!

MARY. You'll have to prove it!

CORAL. I *can* prove it! No forgery is ever infallible! Handwriting is our individual stamp! Who has done this criminal thing! Not only criminal in its direct purpose to me but so destroying to our friendships! Who did this? [*Going from one to the other.*] You? You? You? I suppose the lawyer did it!

MARY [*resenting the direct accusation*]. How can you question my integrity?

CORAL. What this would have done to me, if I believed it! But it is a forgery!

HORTENSE. How can you tell?

CORAL. There's a stop mark here and here and there! His handwriting flows too easily for an imitator to copy! A forger halts, being over-anxious to copy accurately, and leaves his halting mark like a period at the end of the word. Who did this thing? You? You?

SUE. Henry gave it to me. He said Trevor forgot he had dropped it, he was so intoxicated!

CORAL. That's never true of Trevor. Henry gave this to you?

SUE. Yes.

CORAL [*tearing up the letter and giving the bits to Sue*]. Then give it back and tell him I see through his trickery at last! He has stooped to forgery because I refused him!

MARY. But Coral this isn't sufficient proof!

CORAL. The whole effect of the writing is wrong! The whole personality emanating from it isn't Trevor's.

Oh, you've done a dreadful thing to worry me like this tonight! Please, please go and let me have some rest. You've all but destroyed our friendship tonight.

BESS. Even if the letter isn't true, marriage to any man will smash your career!

CORAL [*emotionally heroic*]. What will it matter in a thousand years if I played for a public or not? When we're lying in our graves what will it matter? There will be triumph only in having loved!

MARY. *Loved!* Yes!

CORAL. Then it's my job to triumph over the bondage of marriage and *make* it serve my freedom!

SUE. The impossible!

CORAL. Some have done it! I shall do it! I shall blaze the trail, I *can!* One must have courage and a *will!* I want my career and I'll have my children too! It's *not* woman's entire job to look after the children! We've never given the *fathers* half a chance!

MARY. Tell *that* to the Court!

CORAL. I go into this with my eyes open, determined to make it serve me!

HORTENSE. Life itself will get you!

CORAL. But I will have made it easier for those who follow! Oh, my dears, I've thought it over and over and over before making this decision. We're successful, all of us, yes, but are we *complete?* I wish for each of you the happiness I have found in the one man destined for me! It is the law of life and the only compensation for death!

[*There is a definite pause.*]

HORTENSE [*starts to leave*]. I admire your courage. When you need me, I'll be there. [*Takes Coral's hand.*] Forgive us for trying to save you for the world. If I can get away from the hospital this noon I'll come to church.

BESS [*goes to Coral and puts her hand on her shoulder*]. And *I* like your courage. If *I* could meet a man who would inspire such devotion from *me*, I'd feel exactly as you do about it.

SUE [*approaches Coral to kiss her*]. Marry your Trevor Ballin then, because love like that doesn't come often, and when it comes it's worth a risk.

MARY [*goes to Coral*]. I haven't seen any men worth it, perhaps in another generation they'll be up to date enough for us, but if I could find one to feel that way about, I suppose I would do the same thing! [*Kisses Coral.*]

SUE. If I could meet one to really love like that I'd give up my career for him!

HORTENSE. Maybe we would all be *fools* enough to do it!

SUE [*as she goes out*]. I think I would.

BESS [*as she goes out*]. And *I* —

MARY [*as she goes out*]. And — *I.*

CORAL [*leans in the doorway looking after them and says softly to herself and happily*]. Not *fools*, my dears — mere — *women!*

CURTAIN

THE MENU

A ONE-ACT PLAY

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BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Original production at the Romany Club, Chicago, Ill., April 1929, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

HUMPHREY, *the young lover*.....*Crosby Hodgman*
MYRTIS, *the young girl*.....*Dorothy Braun*
THE FOUR WAITERS.....*Marshall Kruse*

The surprising farce comedy value of this play is to have the parts of the four waiters played by *one* capable actor who will know how to make the changes of costume just adequate enough for characterization and incomplete enough for comedy effect.

SCENE: For the stage, an interior of a fashionable restaurant. For the home, a table set before a window, or in a bow-window, in a sun-parlor or breakfast room, any nook that gives a suggestion of a fashionable hotel dining-room.

THE MENU

SCENE: *A table in a fashionable restaurant is set for two. The waiter first appears as the head waiter in dress suit, white vest, black tie; he wears eye-glasses, stands very erect, is very important, and speaks with an English accent. Later as the assistant head-waiter, he wears a dress suit, black vest, and black tie, no eye-glasses, a bald wig, and a moustache. He has the affable manners and accent of an emotional Frenchman. As the bus boy he wears a tight white coat, closed over a collar, with narrow braid trimming and no buttons. He wears ruffled red hair, a false nose, and slinks in manner. As the waiter who serves the meal he wears white collar, a white tie, and a tight, colored uniform coat decorated with brass buttons. He is more bored than anything else, and plays the part without eccentricity.*

WAITER [*enters from left dressed as the head waiter, using an English accent*]. Good evening, madam.

MYRTIS [*enters from right looking exquisite in evening gown, opera coat, carrying a corsage bouquet*]. A table for two.

WAITER. For two?

MYRTIS. Two.

HUMPHREY [*looking handsome in a dinner jacket follows Myrtis*]. Two.

WAITER. This table, madam? [*Offers table at extreme right, which need not show.*]

MYRTIS. That table? It is too close to other people.

HUMPHREY. Can't you do better?

WAITER. Saturday night, sir, is our biggest night.

MYRTIS. There must be place!

WAITER. This table, madam? [*Crosses to left and indicates a table, also invisible.*]

MYRTIS [*follows*]. Yes, thanks. [*Retreats.*] But oh, it has a ship of candy as a centrepiece!

WAITER. Yes, madam, everybody admires the candy pieces made by our own chef.

MYRTIS. I couldn't stand it, Humphrey. It will remind me every moment of my sailing tomorrow. I couldn't stand it.

HUMPHREY [*sympathetically to waiter*]. She couldn't stand it.

WAITER [*Raises his shoulders in dismay and looks about loftily*]. I don't know what else I can do, sir. If you will wait, someone might finish.

MYRTIS. There's an empty table. [*Starts toward the table set at centre.*]

WAITER. That table, madam, is reserved.

MYRTIS. No matter, if they are not here on time, when you're so crowded. Give *them* the candied ocean liner!

WAITER. But, madam —

HUMPHREY. Yes, this will just suit us.

WAITER. But, sir —

HUMPHREY [*offers waiter a bill*]. I appreciate your reserving it for *us*.

WAITER [*pockets bill surreptitiously*]. Oh, very well, sir. [*Holds back a chair for Myrtis.*]

MYRTIS [*seems about to take the offered chair, but changes her mind in favor of the one opposite*]. I'd rather sit here.

WAITER [*hurries to help her but arrives too late*]. As you please, madam.

[*Humphrey takes the chair Myrtis refused. Waiter pours water into their glasses, gives each a huge menu card and disappears off right.*]

MYRTIS [*beams at Humphrey*]. It's just perfect, Humphrey, you and me and candlelight.

HUMPHREY [*intensely*]. Myrtis darling, you are so changeable tonight! I can't make you out! Why, why, must you go to Europe and leave me?

MYRTIS. Are you quite sure you are not wishing you had taken some other girl out to dine?

HUMPHREY. Dear, my dear, I am so utterly in love with you!

MYRTIS. Oh, Hump, be careful! They mustn't hear you talk so loud.

HUMPHREY. I want to crush you and kiss you —

MYRTIS. There are an awful lot of people looking on. There are an awful lot of people looking on!

HUMPHREY. They're too busy with their own affairs to bother about us.

MYRTIS. But if they hear you!

HUMPHREY. Let them! I must settle it tonight. I won't let you go. What has made you so — so changeable! You are torturing me!

MYRTIS. Oh, Hump, do be careful; there's a man over there eating lobster and he has his eye on me.

HUMPHREY. Where? I'll fix him!

MYRTIS. No, no, no. There's a girl over that way eyeing you too. She was eating a lamb-chop, stopped and stared at you, chop-bone in hand, pink paper frill and all.

HUMPHREY. Let 'em go, Myrt. Time's short. It's wicked, wicked, to make it so hard for two people like us to get off alone together.

MYRTIS. You can't call this being alone.

HUMPHREY. It's being alone in a crowd anyway.

MYRTIS. Did they all come here, I wonder, same as we did, to be alone?

WAITER [*dressed as the assistant head waiter enters from right. He uses a French accent. He gives them napkins*]. Have you given your order, monsieur?

HUMPHREY. Order? Oh, no.

MYRTIS. We were talking.

HUMPHREY. What'll you have, Myrtis?

MYRTIS. I don't know. I have to read through it. What are you going to have?

HUMPHREY. I don't know. [*To the waiter.*] What have you got?

WAITER. Vatever madame and monsieur prefere. Perhaps an hor d'œuvre, canapé niçoise, tomato elysée, medaillon cardinal, or maybe caviar Romanoff.

MYRTIS. Not Romanoff. It makes me think of the Czar.

WAITER. Maybe madame prefere some soup? Consommé écossaise or brunoise — or maybe a leetle fish? Suprême of Columbia River Salmon, Mousseline —

MYRTIS. Mousseline! That's what it was!

WAITER [*begins to write down the order*]. You take the salmon Mousseline, madame —

MYRTIS. No, no, I don't want salmon, but that's the name of the silk for Dora's bridesmaid dresses. I've been trying to remember it all day.

WAITER. Or noisette of lamb, Armentière? Madame, you vill prefere maybe, Richelieu Cisco, sauce Château with truffles?

MYRTIS. Where's that?

WAITER. Zere, madame. [*Points with his pencil upon the menu card she is holding.*] Zere, monsieur. [*Same business to Humphrey.*] Or squab shicken, madame, very spessial.

MYRTIS. You mean especially fancy?

WAITER. Like zis, madame. It have a slice of pineapple all brown glacé vid butter, you know, and zen it have a sauce cream vid mushroom and vone leetle slim

slice of ham, joust for taste, and the shicken, joust the breast, round, comme ça, golden brown and all it come, in a leetle glass house by itself, like ze vindows in a conservatoire to keep les fleurs. And it is varm inside, and all ze juice kep' in, délicieusement, and ze dew of it is like ze dew of flowers, like pearls, you know, sort of — vat you say — you say — like you know — it drip — ze juice, it drip!

MYRTIS. Where is it on the card?

WAITER. Not on ze menu, madame, I make it spessi*al* for *you!*

HUMPHREY [*practical information*]. How would you like some roast beef, Myrtis?

MYRTIS. Maybe I'll just take a salad. I went to three teas this afternoon and I'm not a bit hungry. I'll find something. Just wait on somebody else and come back.

WAITER [*tries to conceal his annoyance*]. Very vell, madame. [*Exit right.*]

MYRTIS [*in a whisper*]. Aren't the prices simply terrible?

HUMPHREY. Not worse than at other places.

MYRTIS. I was scared to take the chicken when the price wasn't listed on the card.

HUMPHREY. Did you *want* the chicken?

MYRTIS. It sounded very good.

HUMPHREY. Have it then.

MYRTIS. But Hump, you'll think me just a gold-digger.

HUMPHREY. Do you think I want to give you a *cheap* dinner?

MYRTIS. No, no, but one could feed a whole family on —

HUMPHREY. Well, we're not feeding a family, yet. Here, waiter! [*Beckons.*]

MYRTIS [*admiringly*]. Oh, Hump, you're so capable!

WAITER [*enters from right*]. Yes, monsieur?

HUMPHREY. Bring the chicken.

WAITER [*writes*]. Shicken. Potatoes?

MYRTIS. No potatoes for me.

HUMPHREY. One order for me.

WAITER. Au gratin?

HUMPHREY. No, plain, mashed.

WAITER. Sample, oui, avec parsley and melted butter.

HUMPHREY. Have it your own way.

WAITER. Maybe madame like a salade, heart of palm vinaigrette viz alligator pear, délicieuse.

MYRTIS. Where's that?

WAITER [*points*]. Zere, madame.

MYRTIS [*gulps*]. Oh, yes, it *must* be *very* good.

WAITER. Coffee?

HUMPHREY. A pot with a large cup right away.

MYRTIS. And hot water.

WAITER. And dessert?

MYRTIS. We'll order that later.

WAITER. Very vell, madame. [*Exit left.*]

MYRTIS. Heart of palm and alligator pear. You're not buying a dinner, you're buying a plantation!

HUMPHREY. No, darling, we're renting for two hours [*glances about*] one dozen crystal chandeliers, thousands of blocks of white and black marble —

MYRTIS [*glancing about and trying to outdo him in description*]. And a million gallons of spouting water over a hundred drooping ferns, ten pairs of cherry brocade drapes —

HUMPHREY. A billion cubic feet of air scented with tobacco smoke and pierced by the quack of four hundred mouths —

MYRTIS. Which drown out whatever music they may be playing 'way down there.

HUMPHREY. We are renting four waiters. We've had two already. Here comes the third, bringing us butter.

MYRTIS [*giggles*]. Oh, Hump, you're so amusing!

[*Waiter dressed as the bus boy enters from left and places a dab of butter on their butter plates. He goes to a side-table, returns with a plate of rolls*].

MYRTIS. How scared he looks.

HUMPHREY. Maybe he's new.

MYRTIS. If he makes a mistake that pompous old waiter will deluge him with French.

HUMPHREY. Let's hope he's Swedish and can't understand. [*To waiter as he passes the bread.*] Have you some of that crisp toast, all curled up?

WAITER [*dumbly*]. Huh?

HUMPHREY. He *is* Swedish.

MYRTIS [*motions*]. Toast! Bread — flat — brown — *burnt!*

[*Waiter looks about distressed.*]

MYRTIS. Let it go. If he calls the head waiter, they'll rag him! [*To waiter.*] Never mind.

[*Waiter looks relieved and goes out left.*]

HUMPHREY. Myrtis, you can't go off to Europe tomorrow!

MYRTIS. But the cabin is paid for and I took care to choose a stunning coat and hat for promenading on the deck.

HUMPHREY. You chose the most fetching on the market to make yourself the most fetching on the market. Why must you hypnotize other men? Isn't your vanity fed enough by your ownership of me?

MYRTIS. But Hump, dear, I don't *own* you.

HUMPHREY. What do you call it then! What do you call it when your face grows and duplicates itself all over my office desk in the busiest hours when I need every brain cell for work? Oh, how your face haunts me! I haven't a blotter thick enough to blot it out!

MYRTIS. Oh, Hump, dear, you're so intense!

HUMPHREY [*slides his hands across the table to take hers*]. Don't tease me. Don't say in one breath that I mean more to you than any other man —

MYRTIS. But that's true. I do feel that way about you.

HUMPHREY. Then marry me right away.

MYRTIS. How do I know how long it is going to last, if I don't put it to the test? If I don't meet other men — well, say, promenading on the deck?

HUMPHREY. There'll be plenty on the deck. What's the color of your new hat?

MYRTIS. Lipstick red.

HUMPHREY. Sure, you'll meet 'em, but you can't go studying men *internationally* to get a perspective on me. They don't give us a life term long enough for that.

MYRTIS. I'm only nineteen.

HUMPHREY. Eighteen is the legal age for marriage for girls.

MYRTIS. Yes, that's a trick to get us married before we know better.

HUMPHREY. Myrtis, look at me.

MYRTIS. Don't look at me that way. They'll *see* what you are *saying* to me. Your eyes are *shrieking* it!

HUMPHREY. *They're* saying the same things to each other.

MYRTIS. Lots of them are eating very dully and saying nothing.

HUMPHREY. Then they said it ten years ago.

MYRTIS. The girl with the chop, I mean she finished her chop, but she's eating ice cream and watching us.

HUMPHREY. Let her. If you go away tomorrow we will lose our happiness. One can always wake up a minister. Besides, it's so early. I'm sure he hasn't gone to sleep yet. We'll transfer your trunk from the dock to this hotel. Oh, Myrt, think of shooting up in the elevators to rooms all our own —

MYRTIS [*nervously*]. Here's the waiter with the ice. No ice for me, thanks.

WAITER [*as the bus boy, enters from left and insists upon putting ice into their glasses*]. Ice? Ice? [*Gives Myrtis ice.*]

MYRTIS [*covers her glass with her hand*]. No, I said no ice. He doesn't take it either.

[*Waiter showing no intelligence gives ice to Humphrey*].

MYRTIS. I said he doesn't take ice either.

HUMPHREY. Oh, let him. They give us the ice with the chandeliers. [*Waiter goes out left.*]

MYRTIS. I would like to make them understand just once that I don't like ice but if we complain to the head waiter, he'll just clip his ears!

HUMPHREY. Where was I? Oh, yes, shooting up in the elevators to rooms all our own —

MYRTIS. Oh, Hump, Hump! The man with the lobster, he's starting on an artichoke. How he must like to pick on things!

HUMPHREY. Will you *listen* to me?

MYRTIS. Yes, dear, but don't talk so loud.

HUMPHREY. If we were able to kiss without eyeing the taxi driver for fear he'd turn round or —

MYRTIS. Maybe we can do it tomorrow, in the open, on the gangplank, just before they haul in the ropes. Everybody will be too busy to watch us then.

HUMPHREY. If you really cared, you couldn't go away.

MYRTIS. You know Archie Bancock? He's got blue eyes.

HUMPHREY. What if he has?

MYRTIS. When you look at me, your eyes get dark and veiled, sort as if you were covering smoldering coals.

HUMPHREY. Do they?

MYRTIS. Yesterday I was wondering what blue eyes would look like if they cared that way for me.

HUMPHREY [*scandalized*]. *What?*

MYRTIS. I was a little ashamed but I couldn't help it, being curious. I even went so far as to wonder if there is a difference in kisses from blondes and brunettes.

HUMPHREY. You are putting me on the rack.

MYRTIS. If I did marry you tonight, I might still be wondering next week, about blondes.

HUMPHREY. You don't know what you are saying —

MYRTIS. I can't marry you just because you are the first man I love. It's a higher compliment to you if you're to be the *last* one.

HUMPHREY. In your sweet, unsophisticated innocence —

MYRTIS. It's terrible to be taunted with sweet, unsophisticated innocence.

HUMPHREY. You're been attending silly lectures. I am cross at myself for continuing to care for you. I ought to banish you [*makes movement as if to brush her out of his head*] but you stick!

MYRTIS. If you can't brush me out, I'll just stick. And if I can't brush you out, you'll just stick, but I have to do a lot of brushing to make sure.

HUMPHREY. When you say these things, you make me hot and cold! You seem to be slipping through my fingers, as if I couldn't hold you!

MYRTIS. Here comes the chicken dripping with juice in its own little glass conservatory.

HUMPHREY. The sight of food nauseates me!

[*Waiter enters from left wearing coat with brass buttons. He carries a tray of dishes, which he places upon a side-table, then places individual portions of chicken under glass upon their service plates, uncovers the chicken with a flourish and starts to serve the potatoes.*]

MYRTIS. Oh, it looks divine and it smells so good! [*Eats with relish.*]

[*Humphrey looks at his portion with disdain. Waiter serves Myrtis potatoes.*]

MYRTIS [*protesting*]. But I don't eat potatoes.

HUMPHREY [*allows waiter to serve him potatoes*]. You don't have to be afraid of getting fat.

MYRTIS. I must discipline myself in time.

HUMPHREY. Discipline! You'd better discipline your roving eyes, stay home, and eat potatoes with me.

WAITER [*has been serving the salad and now at Myrtis's left offers a spoon of dressing from a small bowl*]. Dressing, madam?

MYRTIS [*nods to waiter and speaks to Humphrey*]. Now you've said it! That's just what life is like.

HUMPHREY. Like what?

MYRTIS. The menu.

HUMPHREY. The menu?

WAITER. Dressing, sir?

[*Humphrey waves it away as if it annoys him. Waiter exits left.*]

MYRTIS. Life offers us a wide choice; it is up to us to pick and choose what we want.

HUMPHREY. But what one picks is indigestion.

MYRTIS. Only to learn what *not* to eat next time.

HUMPHREY. You can guess about combinations without really trying them. Nobody is enough of a nut to eat marshmallow mousse with oyster sauce.

MYRTIS. Oysters! You should have ordered oysters!

HUMPHREY. I'm not an ostrophagist!

MYRTIS. You're not a *what?*

HUMPHREY. One who eats oysters.

MYRTIS. Oh, Hump, where do you find all those clever things to say?

HUMPHREY. Live with me and find out.

MYRTIS. You are the most fascinating darling!

HUMPHREY [*to waiter, as bus boy, who has entered from left and tries to give him ice*]. No ice.

WAITER [*giving them ice stupidly*]. Ice — ice.

MYRTIS. No ice.

HUMPHREY. We don't want any ice. Take it out. [*As waiter goes off right.*] You were saying, darling, that I was — what were you saying I was, darling, when that boob of a waiter cut in with the ice?

MYRTIS. I've forgotten; where were we?

HUMPHREY. You were saying I was the most —

MYRTIS. Oh, I remember, we were talking about the menu.

HUMPHREY. No, no, about *me*, you were saying *I* was —

MYRTIS. The chicken is delicious, but with that man eating lobster, I almost wish I had chosen lobster.

HUMPHREY. And that man rather than me!

MYRTIS. No, I didn't think that. [*Gives the man a new glance of appraisal.*] But he's not bad looking.

HUMPHREY [*pushes his plates aside, and takes out a cigarette*]. May I? [*But he very soon puts the cigarette aside as if the taste of it sickens him.*]

MYRTIS. That's my nature, to want lobster when I have eaten chicken. And if I had ordered the lobster I would have wanted [*consults menu*] oh, perhaps Gondolier imported sardines. Doesn't that sound romantically Venetian? Do you suppose they brought them across the ocean in gondolas?

HUMPHREY. I can see you dramatizing yourself in a gondola in Venice with some Italian count.

MYRTIS [*reading the menu*]. Here's another. Pig's feet à la mode in jelly. Do you suppose they serve them fashionably shod in leather?

HUMPHREY [*reads the menu scornfully*]. No, in shoe-peg corn.

MYRTIS. Shoe-peg corn, you made that up!

HUMPHREY. No, there it is.

MYRTIS. Canned, fifty cents. I'd never choose that! It's not æsthetic!

HUMPHREY. Myrtis, they have been talking rubbish to you about freedom and careers and being out in the world.

MYRTIS. I need some more butter.

HUMPHREY [*glances around for a waiter but no waiter is visible*]. Oh, waiter!

MYRTIS. They give one such small dabs of butter.

HUMPHREY. Oh, waiter!

MYRTIS. There's one over there [*looks off left*] but he's not ours. He's gazing everywhere except at us.

HUMPHREY. Waiter!

MYRTIS. No use. The other one [*looks off right*] is concentrating on the tip he's expecting.

[*Waiter, as the bus boy, passes them with dish of ice but ignores them. He enters from right and is going out left.*]

HUMPHREY. Hey, boy!

WAITER. Ice?

HUMPHREY. The lady wants some more butter.

WAITER. No butter. [*Shakes his head.*] Ice. [*Exit left.*]

HUMPHREY. Hey, boy get me some butter, or I'll report you!

MYRTIS. Oh, don't. His ears went back like a scared rabbit. He knows that some day the head waiter *will* clip them!

HUMPHREY. What a dinner! I had hoped it would be a great decision, and I find myself instead staring at empty weeks and months and years without you. Is there no place where I can talk to you alone, without interruption? If I have to *walk* you home I'll make you listen to me. Why are you fighting your own heart?

MYRTIS. Fighting my own heart? Because my head is awfully muddled about the rest of the menu. [*Fingers it idly without looking at it.*] I may be very glad to come back to bacon and eggs.

HUMPHREY. I suppose I am the bacon and eggs.

MYRTIS. Most people do prefer the simple dishes in the end, but only *after* they have tasted every other dish.

WAITER [*now dressed as the waiter with brass buttons enters from left, removes their plates to the tray on the side-table*]. Dessert, sir?

MYRTIS. Hump, you haven't eaten. But I'd like some cakes. I like to choose from the French pastry.

WAITER. French pastry. You, sir?

HUMPHREY. Nothing.

[*Waiter goes out left with the tray.*]

MYRTIS. The French pastry always looks marvellous, but no matter which cake I take I'm sure that another would have tasted better. I'd like to try a different one every day. Maybe in the end I could be perfectly sure of the best.

HUMPHREY. Myrtis, I'm just an everyday sort of fellow who doesn't know how to make pretty speeches. But of all the women I've known, you've meant most to me. I can understand why men *shoot* themselves!

MYRTIS [*frightened by his intensity*]. Oh, Hump, don't slump! People are looking at us.

HUMPHREY [*in anguish*]. What do I care? When a man offers a girl all he can be, all he can earn, all his faith! I've placed the dreams of all my years in a shrine with you, Myrtis!

MYRTIS [*after a pause answers wistfully*]. Yes, Hump, you have dressed me up as you wanted me to be and put

me into a shrine. And you love most about me only what *you* have imagined. That is what makes me afraid. You *refuse* to see me as I am.

HUMPHREY. You are trying to make me believe you want to be a worldly wise woman and you're really such a young and good one —

MYRTIS. There aren't any good and bad women, Hump, any more than there are good and bad men. There isn't any such division.

HUMPHREY [*startled*]. What — why — how can you say such a thing!

MYRTIS. The only difference is that some women want to try all the menu and do, like most men — like you, perhaps. The other women want to, but don't *dare*.

HUMPHREY [*pushes back his chair*]. Myrtis! You make me — blind!

MYRTIS. Is it a blow between the eyes? The truth usually is.

HUMPHREY. It is not the truth!

MYRTIS. Men have been saying for many centuries, Hump, what they think is the truth about women. Maybe some day they are going to let us talk a little for ourselves.

HUMPHREY. I can't stand this hot room! It suffocates me!

MYRTIS. I'm sorry to smash your illusions, but illusions are only the fabrications we drape upon others. I must find out much about myself before I decide upon you.

HUMPHREY. You will come back, old, cynical. Don't drag our love into the dust. Myrt, dear, you are the only woman I really have loved! Be fair, be fair to *me.*

MYRTIS. You have made your comparisons. Give me a chance to make mine. You have experimented. Why shouldn't I?

HUMPHREY [*rises in unsuppressed emotion*]. I'm *ill.* Let's go!

MYRTIS [*rises*]. Don't make a scene!

WAITER [*as the French waiter, enters from left with a large tray of French pastry*]. You are leaving, sir?

HUMPHREY [*throws money carelessly upon the table*]. That will cover my bill. You may keep the change. [*He hurries out right.*]

WAITER [*elaborately offers Myrtis the tray of pastry*]. No French pastry, madame? No French pastry?

MYRTIS [*symbolizes the meaning of the entire play. With a sidelong glance, half of longing, half of doubt, considers the cakes*]. No, not *now!* I — I wouldn't know — *which* — *one* — to *choose!* [*Exit right.*] [*The waiter shrugs his shoulders.*]

CURTAIN

FACING FACT

A ONE-ACT PLAY

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BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Produced at the Romany Club, Chicago, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

GERTRUDE, *the mother*.....*Diantha Munger*
GWENDOLYN, *the daughter*.....*Toinette Lamm*
COLLIN, *the bachelor*.....*Christopher J. Thomas*

SCENE: A living-room.

FACING FACT

SCENE: *A living-room. Gertrude and Gwendolyn beautiful in evening gowns enter from right.*

GERTRUDE [*as if continuing a long dissertation*]. And if in these early years you become so intolerant of people, how when you are older can you be kind and sweet — [*Sits on davenport left.*]

GWEN [*drops upon right arm of davenport*]. Yes, mother.

GERTRUDE. The young men in your group of friends are too young and silly. You must not waste your time with them.

GWEN. Yes, mother.

GERTRUDE. Their way has still to be made and it will be a long time before any one of them will be able to support you.

GWEN. Yes, mother.

GERTRUDE. Whereas Collin Trent has all the background of a distinguished family.

GWEN. Yes, mother.

GERTRUDE. Gwendolyn, stop "yessing" me.

GWEN. Yes, mother, but I am agreeing with you.

GERTRUDE. You agree with me and go off and do just as you like anyway.

GWEN. But we have different ambitions. My ideas —

GERTRUDE. The ideas of your generation are wishy-washy!

GWEN. The ideas of yours, mother, are willy-nilly.

GERTRUDE. I wish you were safely married, I do, indeed.

GWEN [*creeping close to her on the davenport*]. I wish that you were safely married, mother, I do, indeed.

GERTRUDE. I shall always be true to the memory of your father.

GWEN. You are too young not to marry again.

GERTRUDE. Marriage for me, at my age?

GWEN. Think of it!

GERTRUDE. I can't think of it.

GWEN. Exactly, you can't. Your mind is petrified.

GERTRUDE. Petrified!

GWEN. Like Collin Trent's.

GERTRUDE. He is the most charming man of our acquaintance.

GWEN. Then why don't *you* marry him, mother?

GERTRUDE. I? I?

GWEN. Why not?

GERTRUDE. I never thought of such a thing.

GWEN. Because you want him, you want to give him to me.

GERTRUDE. Gwendolyn, I am incapable of managing you any more.

GWEN. So you have picked out a possible husband who might —

GERTRUDE. Collin would give you protection and position —

GWEN [*rises and prances about*]. Ever see him dance? No Varsity Drag for him!

GERTRUDE. He is handsome.

GWEN. His face is like a mask.

GERTRUDE. You mean that he is such a gentleman that his expression is conservative.

GWEN. Oh, it's conserved! I'd rather see a man move his face as if he still exercised it!

GERTRUDE. It is his bearing. He carries himself well.

GWEN. You mean his collars are so tight he has to stand up.

GERTRUDE. He has manners.

GWEN [*makes a deep curtesy*]. Oh my, yes, parlor tricks from Queen Victoria.

GERTRUDE. Which is more than can be said about your rude boys.

GWEN. They aren't so young. Don't call them boys.

GERTRUDE. They look like children to *me*.

GWEN. Well, Collin looks like a grandfather to *me*.

GERTRUDE. I am beside myself with anxiety for your future. If your father were alive he'd stop these drinking parties and smoking and what-not parties.

GWEN. What-not parties!

GERTRUDE. I've talked to other mothers. We feel some concerted action is necessary, but it's all so vague, and in some cases, so shocking, we can't understand you.

GWEN [*stands behind couch*]. You don't have to.

GERTRUDE. You must marry. Collin will be here at any moment. From what he said yesterday I think he's on the brink of proposing to you and you must take him. He's the only man I can think of wanting for a son-in-law.

GWEN. He's the only man *you* want for a son-in-law. [*As voices are heard off.*] There he is now.

GERTRUDE [*rises*]. Now, my dear, do try to please your mother for once — just once — I so want you to be happy. [*Exit right.*]

COLLIN [*in dinner jacket, enters from left.*] Hello Gwen.

GWEN. Hello, there, old dear. Come over here, I want a word with you. [*Sits on couch.*]

COLLIN [*approaches cautiously*]. Not another beastly toad in my hands?

GWEN. Not this time, fraidy.

COLLIN [*sits cautiously*]. What tricks are you up to now?

GWEN. Don't be afraid of me. [*Pulls him closer.*]

COLLIN. You young rebels *do* frighten me.

GWEN. I look very young to you, do I?

COLLIN. I would say "childish"!

GWEN [*cuddles close to him*]. You couldn't imagine me married to you, could you?

COLLIN [*edges away*]. So that's your game.

GWEN [*shifts her position nearer to him and looks at him mischievously*]. Won't be caught, eh?

COLLIN [*rises*]. Now *what* are you *up* to?

GWEN [*rises*]. I want to persuade you to get married.

COLLIN. Not to you, my little girl.

GWEN [*perches on the arm of the couch*]. So that's settled.

COLLIN. What is?

GWEN. That you don't want to marry me.

COLLIN. You don't need a husband. You want a press agent.

GWEN. You've turned me down flat. Where are your manners?

COLLIN. One can't *waste* manners on *your* crowd.

GWEN. Don't slur my crowd. You wouldn't like to know what they think of you. They think you are dull and stiff, that you criticize them for speed because you haven't any of your own, or they suspect you of all kinds of naughty thoughts in secret because you are so goody-goody in public, they —

COLLIN [*goes toward her*]. I'd like to *spank* every *one* of them.

GWEN. Whoopee! That's the first time I have ever seen you leap to expression! I do believe you can still be married. I've picked the girl for you.

COLLIN [*walks around back of couch*]. That's generous but I'm not considering marriage.

GWEN [*following him*]. They ought to tax men who don't marry, in order to endow the illegitimate children.

COLLIN [*turning around on her wrathfully*]. I have no —

GWEN. Now don't get personal.

COLLIN [*sputtering*]. But — But —

GWEN [*as they both stand behind the davenport*]. If I scratched you with a pin you'd chip like veneered mahogany and show underneath plain wood, human like the rest of us but dried out by time.

COLLIN [*starts off*]. You may tell your mother I'll not stay to dinner —

GWEN [*catches his hand and pulls him back*]. Don't go off like a peeved child! You haven't asked me yet who the girl is I've picked.

COLLIN [*in front of couch*]. It doesn't interest me.

GWEN [*back of couch*]. She is the most beautiful one I know.

COLLIN. Eh?

GWEN [*with real tenderness*]. At least I've done you that compliment.

COLLIN. Who is she?

GWEN [*with real admiration*]. And the most unselfish, faithful and fine —

COLLIN. So. Who —

GWEN [*looking about cautiously*]. It's — it's — mother.

COLLIN [*surprised, drops on one knee on couch facing Gwen*]. Gertrude! Nonsense!

GWEN [*leaning over back of couch*]. Yes, she's more beautiful than any of us, you know she is. All she needs is to be aroused.

COLLIN. Gwendolyn! Such things are not discussed.

GWEN. But they have to be. Why not face fact? You simply haven't thought of her that way. She's much too young to stay a widow. I would be infinitely *obliged* to you.

COLLIN. Why?

GWEN. When she wants an orchid gown she buys me one. Perhaps, I would rather have green. Whatever she wants for herself she denies herself for me, gown, hat, or man — you. [*Points forefinger at his chest.*]

COLLIN. Oh, no.

GWEN. Oh, yes.

COLLIN. What makes you so sure?

GWEN [*sits on back of couch*]. You come and come and come and do not see her eyes light up? That she is not wearing second best for you? That the dinners

are very good? That you sink into conveniently comfortable chairs with your favorite cigarettes dotting the landscape?

COLLIN. You are imagining this.

GWEN. She takes every opportunity to pronounce your name. Her hands quiver with excitement when you arrive.

COLLIN. You are poking fun at me.

GWEN [*rises and swings away at left of couch*]. What self-consciousness! Oh, your generation is so afraid of being ridiculous!

COLLIN [*rises*]. But if you *are* trying to embarrass me —

GWEN. You froze her in your mind as my father's wife and you've never been able to defrost yourself.

COLLIN. But she couldn't *bring* herself to marry *again.*

GWEN [*sitting on left arm of couch*]. Why not? Do you think it is natural for her to remain a widow? How remote and aloof she has to appear to the world to preserve her dignity! How bitterly lonely she must be! Can't you guess that she is starved?

COLLIN. *Do* children speak this way about their parents?

GWEN. Yes, when they realize that their parents are *not* old.

COLLIN. You are presuming —

GWEN [*rises and faces him*]. Oh, cut the old-fashioned bosh, Collin, get down to facts. People need love. It's the only reward for being alive at all.

COLLIN. What books *have* you been reading?

GWEN. Some from every counter. I can see right through you. I'm offering you love on a platinum platter and you're too wrapped up in prudery to admit that your inhibitions torture you!

COLLIN. What language!

GWEN. Memorized, no doubt. Maybe, result of my own bright mind. In either case, I'm *not* so *dumb* as not to be acquainted with myself. And if you knew yourself as thoroughly as I know myself — well — take a sporting chance! You've yet time to change into a modern mortal. Now, I'll call mother.

COLLIN. No, no — not yet —

GWEN. Get it over with. You need each other. [*Calls off right.*] Mother, come in, Collin wants to talk to you. [*To Collin.*] Now do your best. [*Starts off left.*]

COLLIN [*in panic*]. Here, where are you going?

GWEN. To telephone my own real lover. [*Exit left.*]

GERTRUDE [*enters expectantly from right*]. Good-evening, Collin.

COLLIN. Good-evening, Gertrude.

GERTRUDE. Gwendolyn said you wanted to talk to me.

COLLIN [*confused*]. No — yes — that is —

GERTRUDE [*hopefully*]. Is it about Gwendolyn?

COLLIN. Oh, yes, that is — I —

GERTRUDE. Is it difficult for you to say it?

COLLIN. Yes, yes, *most* difficult.

GERTRUDE [*sits on couch, right*]. It must be. After all, we're the same age, and we have been friends and now — if — that is — [*Waits expectantly.*]

COLLIN [*sits on couch to her left*]. Do you think I ought to be married?

GERTRUDE. Yes, Collin, isn't it time for you to have a home of your own with a wife concerned with your comfort? Think of the companionship!

COLLIN. With Gwendolyn?

GERTRUDE. She will settle down.

COLLIN. What will marriage do for me?

GERTRUDE. It creates the opportunity to rise to magnificent expressions of self. There is much dignity in being a husband.

COLLIN. You want to be proud of me?

GERTRUDE. I *am* proud of you, Collin. I am ready to give you my precious little girl.

COLLIN. She's not little, Gertrude, and I wouldn't call her just *precious.*

GERTRUDE. Well, Gwendolyn may be a little hasty now but —

COLLIN. Oh, hang it, Gertrude, she stuck a pin into me.

GERTRUDE. A pin! [*Looks about couch.*] What —

COLLIN. Oh, a mental prick, my dear, but it's gone deep. She knifed with the coolness of a surgeon.

GERTRUDE. She is very mischievous.

COLLIN. She is very wise, older than you are.

GERTRUDE. Older than I?

COLLIN. Yes, and older than I am.

GERTRUDE. That's a bit of nonsense.

COLLIN. You think you are old, do you?

GERTRUDE. I am a widow and a mother.

COLLIN [*sarcastically*]. And you're sewing the white frilled cap to wear while you knit at the fireside.

GERTRUDE. We don't wear caps any more. That would be a little too old-fashioned.

COLLIN. Just the same, you are preparing for a long wait, aren't you?

GERTRUDE. A wait for what?

COLLIN. That's what I want to know. Wait for what? The whole world waits. [*Rises impetuously.*] What *are* we waiting for? Death? [*Turns and faces Gertrude.*] Or would death only be your release from waiting?

GERTRUDE [*rises, surprised, facing him*]. Collin! *What* are you saying!

COLLIN. Do you think I am so *dumb* as *not* to understand myself?

GERTRUDE. Dumb? You? No!

COLLIN [*vigorously*]. Do you think I want to marry your daughter? No! You cannot fling at me a substitute for yourself!

GERTRUDE. *Myself?*

COLLIN. Gertrude, wake up, it's the millennium when even mothers are young.

GERTRUDE. *Me,* Collin?

COLLIN. My dear, what fools we have been! We have *wasted years!*

GERTRUDE [*drops happily into his arms*]. Oh, Collin, I didn't know.

GWEN [*appears in doorway at left and laughingly points her finger at them*]. You *see!* I *told* you so!

COLLIN [*waves her out dictatorially with his left arm as he embraces Gertrude possessively with his right*]. *You* clear out! You are much too *old* for *me!*

[*Gwen laughs impishly and disappears.*]

CURTAIN

UPSTAGE

A ONE-ACT PLAY

SYMBOLIZING THE LITTLE THEATRE

COPYRIGHT 1927
BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Original performance under the direction of Lionel Robertson at the Ravinia Workship, Ravinia, Ill., another production under the direction of Marie Agnes Foley at the Jack and Jill Theatre, Chicago, and entered by the Carjon Players under the direction of Estelle Carson Jones in the Drama League of Chicago Little Theatre Tournament at the Goodman Theatre, May 1929.

CHARACTERS

[*As played at the Jack and Jill Theatre, Chicago*]

JOHN ALDEN COOPER, *the business manager*
Earl C. Best
SALLY FENTRESS, *the secretary*.....*Carlotta Parron*
RUSHKEWICZ, *the director*.....*J. Lawrence Brooks*
MRS. WHITCOMB, *the president*.....*Irma Freemont*
MR. HAWKINS, *the theatrical magnate*.....*Ben Adam*
SORMA, *the worshipper*.....*Azora Mitchell*
CHORUS OF GIRLS: *Ethel Bell, Alice Francis, B. Ann Maguire, Gertrude Kokkens, J. Allen O'Neil, Mildred Hausher*

SCENE: The stage of a Little Theatre.

UPSTAGE

SCENE: *The stage of a Little Theatre. There is much chattering off stage and confusion of activity. Miss Fentress, annoyed, enters from left carrying a box of envelopes, crosses stage to a table down right, and giving a sullen glance off left, bangs the box upon the table and draws up a chair impatiently. She is young and charming but in an exasperated mood and not any too gentle with the letters she folds into envelopes, stamps, and addresses throughout the play. Mrs. Whitcomb, a woman of fashion, generously eager to be of service, enters from the auditorium.*

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh! Miss Fentress — there you are!

SALLY. Good-morning, Mrs. Whitcomb.

MRS. WHITCOMB. I've been looking all over for you in the front of the house.

SALLY. They've pushed me out of my office. The chorus needs extra dressing-room space for the next play.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh! I wish Mr. Rushkewicz wouldn't insist upon this foreign play. It seemed dull at rehearsal yesterday; when it wasn't dull it was vulgar, but I suppose that's art.

SALLY. Why don't you call a meeting of the Board? I'm ashamed to mail these requests to guarantors for a *third* donation. Get another director and begin all over again.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, we couldn't do that! This is the third Little Theatre we've tried and if we fail again —

SALLY. You couldn't fail if you had John Alden Cooper as director.

MRS. WHITCOMB. John Alden Cooper? He's very good as business manager but you can't expect any art out of that ordinary young man.

SALLY. He isn't ordinary, Mrs. Whitcomb, he's very much of a gentleman.

MRS. WHITCOMB. That's just it. One can't be a gentleman and a director too.

SALLY. What?

MRS. WHITCOMB. I mean — well, you know what I mean — he looks so uninspiredly plain!

SALLY. No, he doesn't wear long hair, and he hasn't cigarette-stained fingers.

MRS. WHITCOMB. He hasn't the temperament, my dear.

SALLY. No temper, you mean.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Whatever it is that swirls around a European like Mr. Rushkewicz. You can't expect artistic flights from a straightforward American! We Americans are so shallow in our feelings.

SALLY. Maybe it's our sense of humor that keeps us from getting hysterical.

MRS. WHITCOMB. I'm so worried. My husband said he had to stop financing the theatre.

SALLY. But as president of the organization, Mrs. Whitcomb, you can take a definite stand against Mr. Rushkewicz.

MRS. WHITCOMB. I know I have to persuade him to be more practical, but every encounter terrifies me. Is he here?

SALLY. In the wings. There'll be a rehearsal soon.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh! dear. I must nerve myself to do it. [*She starts out down left as Alden enters from up right. John Alden Cooper, a typical, clean-washed, and businesslike American young man crosses the stage with a stride that is not of haste so much as direction of purpose.*]

JOHN. Good-morning, Mrs. Whitcomb.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Good morning, Mr. Cooper. [*Turns on second thought.*] Oh! Mr. Cooper, are our finances really very low?

JOHN. I'm on my way to the bank now to try to have them extend our credit.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Are you worried?

JOHN. Very much.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh dear! Oh dear! [*She squares her shoulders.*] Something *must* be done! [*Exit down left.*]

SALLY. Do you think the bank will extend credit?

JOHN. No, but I'm going to make one more try.

SALLY [*pushes the envelopes aside and rises impatiently*]. John! I want to shake you! I'm through with you! Through with you!

JOHN [*approaches her*]. Sally!

SALLY [*retreats*]. I just can't stand it any longer! Take back your ring! [*Takes ring from her engagement finger and places it upon the table.*] I don't love you any more! [*She is nervously near tears.*]

JOHN. Oh! don't say that! You're just nervous and tired from the hard work and disillusionment!

SALLY. Disillusionment! Yes — yes — I want to scream! Here I'm giving all my strength for endless hours to help this theatre forward and there you stand letting Rushkewicz tweak you by the nose! Haven't you any self-respect? Haven't you the nerve to seize the control away from him? Oh! I can't love you when I can't respect you!

JOHN [*distressed*]. Sally! What have I done? What have I done?

SALLY. It's what you haven't done! Business manager! that's all you are! Pay-roll-carrier for the upstart who thinks he can trample all over us because he came from Europe.

JOHN. Coming from Europe does mean something. He has a sort of — exotic attraction. The only travelling I've ever had was my lecture tour through the states after I came out of college. Once or twice, for some extra cash, I became an overcoat salesman for the small towns.

SALLY. Then who has a better right to talk for America than you have?

JOHN. Oh, Sally, my dear, you are too ambitious for me.

SALLY. Didn't you graduate with honors? You made a high mark in the stage-craft course! Don't you give stirring lectures how to establish Little Theatres? But nothing but talk, talk, talk! And what do you *do!* Let a foreigner come and laugh at you!

JOHN. What do you want me to do?

SALLY. Have the directors dismiss Rushkewicz and appoint you director.

JOHN. You mean *I* ought to be the director?

SALLY [*scornfully*]. I suppose your puritanical ancestors are inhibiting your nerve! Why not come forth and speak for yourself, John?

JOHN. But I don't think at all the way Rushkewicz does. I haven't that method of directing. I would do everything differently.

SALLY. And why shouldn't you? *He* doesn't know *how* we think, *what* we feel — he wants to make *us European!* He turned down this three-act play you like so much. [*Indicates a manuscript.*] Says it has no drama, says it's all one tone!

JOHN. But the lives of some people *are* just on one tone! That's what makes the drama in the lives of those farm wives I used to see in Kansas, the agonizing drama that there is no drama.

SALLY. Well, Rush doesn't get it, so we'll have to concoct a pretty regret-letter for your struggling author.

JOHN. We ought to try it out anyway to encourage the author! I'm sorry.

SALLY [*throws the manuscript across the table at him*]. You're being sorry won't get it produced! The only way to get ahead here is to demand your rights! It's a long while ago since our forefathers tracked through primeval forests, John Cooper, and if you haven't a soul of your own to express by this time you can't fly high enough to catch mine! Take back your ring — and find some other girl willing to be the bride of a coward!

JOHN. Sally!

SALLY. Yes, a coward, a coward! [*Drops the ring into his pocket.*] Or inferiority complex! Whatever you call it — find some other girl less demanding to admire you as you are! I can't!

JOHN [*is dazed*]. But — but — I haven't thought of myself as a director — I'm practical — perhaps too practical — but Sally, there's no use staying here at all if you — why, I can't go on without you — my dear, my dear, our plans for the little house, our plans — [*There is confusion off stage.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB [*off stage left*]. But Mr. Rushkewicz, all this comes back upon me!

SALLY [*drying eyes*]. Rush and Mrs. Whitcomb!

JOHN. I'm off — [*Exits through auditorium.*]

RUSHKEWICZ [*precedes Mrs. Whitcomb. His pronunciation has a foreign element*]. To them you must not listen, madame, they know noting about art. All they know how to do is to make money.

MRS. WHITCOMB. But as president of the theatre I shall get all the blame.

RUSHKEWICZ [*busies himself with stage setting*]. Pah! Pah! Pah! They are all numskulls!

MRS. WHITCOMB. But those who have seen the rehearsals go out and say —

RUSHKEWICZ. Pah! These women of small mind!

MRS. WHITCOMB. If you could cut out some of the immoral lines —

RUSHKEWICZ [*interested in his stage setting*]. Not a line! Not a line! Not a line!

MRS. WHITCOMB. But we don't say such —

RUSHKEWICZ. No, no, you clean America! You paint all the dirt white!

MRS. WHITCOMB. But Mr. Rushkewicz, this has to be settled.

RUSHKEWICZ. Madame, I have no time. Chorus, you come! Wailing! You are starving peasants.

MRS. WHITCOMB. If the mayor disapproves and goes to my husband — [*A wail starts off stage left.*]

RUSHKEWICZ. This is a theatre free and experimental! I am director here!

MRS. WHITCOMB. Yes, but my husband pays most of the bills.

RUSHKEWICZ. It is a privilege for him that it is permitted his vulgar money to sustain this experiment in art!

SALLY. Mr. Rushkewicz you are insulting!

[*Chorus enters from left wearing colored smocks or any mixture of costumes for variety and color.*]

RUSHKEWICZ. Cannot you wail! Do you know not what it is to hunger?

GIRL I. No, I don't.

RUSHKEWICZ. Ah, this land, it is so fat!

GIRL I. I'm not fat!

RUSHKEWICZ. It is not allowed that you back-talk to me. Take your positions as we yesterday designed. Crook your finger, that way. You put your foot back. You stretch your neck, long and thin, no doubled chin. Here, you pull your dress down, let us see how thin your chest is, not thin enough, you there, you pull down — [*Puts his hand at a girl's throat.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB. Mr. Rushkewicz, you are dealing with the daughters of our best families.

RUSHKEWICZ. Madame, I am dealing with *dumb-bells!* Is this the best they got to show? [*The girls laugh. They are comic to a certain extent because ignorant of the art of drama, but one feels a surreptitious intelligence in them, a smoldering refusal to be improved by such methods of direction. They are inattentive, mockingly humble and silent, or much preoccupied with vanity case and powder puff.*]

GIRL II. Don't worry, Mrs. Whitcomb, we think he's crazy.

RUSHKEWICZ. Crazy! I am! With no material to work on! Noting matters to them! Noting in life is so important it make excitement to them! Inside they

are sawdust! Oh! for actresses with lightning in their eyes, tears in their voices! It is terrible to keep them because they act for noting!

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, dear me, my husband couldn't possibly pay salaries!

RUSHKEWICZ. Now to the other side of the stage you rush to cry, "Bread, bread!"

[*Girls rush with hands outspread weakly calling "bread."*]

RUSHKEWICZ. So — so — [*He rushes madly screaming "Bread! Bread!"*]

GIRLS [*trying to imitate*]. Bread, bread!

SALLY. They deserve manna from Heaven!

RUSHKEWICZ. Show some *spirit!* Every day we go over the same part! Less time spent in midnight parties leave more energy and the grand imagination to become artists! Now Peasant No. I, your characterization.

GIRL IV [*steps forward and poses, wringing her hands*]. They are all dead, I too shall die, soon I too, I too, will be dead. Dead — I too, too, soon I too shall die!

RUSHKEWICZ. Is that all?

GIRL IV. Those are the lines.

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! Tsch! what do they mean?

GIRL IV. That I too, shall be dead.

RUSHKEWICZ. Dead! *You* not yet are *born!*

GIRL IV. I've tried to make the gestures you want but I don't feel like using them. I don't use gestures like that in my real life.

RUSHKEWICZ. Not for you this gesturing, it is that of a Russian peasant! She says they are all dead, all my cows and my pigs and goats and my horses are all dead, and you must give the feeling of the nourishment of milk from a cow, the cheese from a goat, and the juicy roasting of a pig and the —

GIRL IV. But my part doesn't say anything about pigs and goats.

RUSHKEWICZ. Not wit this you say it [*taps her mouth*] you have it there [*touches her heart*].

GIRL IV. But how can the audience ever know what I'm thinking?

RUSHKEWICZ. Have I not explained and explained that no matter how *small* your part you make it out *that long!* You are one peasant in a crowd but your own life you live when in that crowd, and I must understand although I do not hear or see them that all your pigs are dead.

SALLY. If you're hungry, Mrs. Whitcomb, you'd better go out to lunch. It'll be five o'clock before he brings the cows in.

RUSHKEWICZ. *Your* husband, he has toiled grain out of the black earth but it go to the landowner so what was left gave small hay for your horse — show what that means!

GIRL IV. But I don't know what expression pictures a horse! [*Bends over.*] Do you want me to get down like this?

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! You Americans! You have not the imagination!

GIRL IV. But you jumped to the horse when I was prepared to taste the pig.

RUSHKEWICZ. All right, all right, take pig first. I will make the pictures and you the expression show what goes with the words —

SORMA [*a girl in a brilliant smock daubed with paint enters from left. Her hair hangs over her eyes, her face and hands are daubed with paint and she carries several paint brushes. She looks worn out but glows with an inner intense fire*]. Rudie, the carpenter has brought the stairs.

RUSHKEWICZ. I rehearse.

SORMA. But I can't paint. They take up space. Can't he bring them in?

RUSHKEWICZ. One moment.

SORMA. But he doesn't want to wait.

RUSHKEWICZ [*waves*]. Pig, good to eat, fine when smoked, no more, gone, never again.

GIRL IV [*tries to assume various emotions*]. They are —

RUSHKEWICZ. Horse, fields, grain, village —

GIRL IV. All —

RUSHKEWICZ. The cottage, all the huts, all the villagers, all the joys and sorrows, all the comings and goings, all the vodka drinking, gone —

GIRL IV. Dead —

RUSHKEWICZ. Complete ruin, devastation, blotted out, for ever gone. Your expressions have shown absolutely noting!

GIRL IV. But you can't crowd all —

RUSHKEWICZ. We get this if stay we do to midnight. [*Chorus takes relaxed positions.*]

GIRL I. Wake me up when the cock crows!

GIRL II. Give me your knee for a pillow.

GIRL III. I brought my manicure set along. [*Begins to polish nails.*]

GIRL V. Maybe I'll finish my petit-point chair today. [*Begins to embroider tapestry.*]

RUSHKEWICZ. Now again.

GIRL IV. They —

RUSHKEWICZ. Pig.

GIRL IV. Are —

RUSHKEWICZ. Horse —

GIRL IV. All —

RUSHKEWICZ. Fields, huts, goats —

GIRL IV. Dead.

RUSHKEWICZ. You picture for me absolutely noting!

GIRL IV [*in tears*]. But it's silly — how can I —

SORMA [*enters again*]. Rudie, the carpenter!

RUSHKEWICZ [*waves Sorma out impatiently and shakes Girl* IV]. These things, all you had [*his acting becomes*

vitally stirring] are gone — you feel deep — deep — and you must face the life again, and you have not the courage to struggle! It is this agony of memory that shrieks through the lips inarticulate whilst every line of the body flings out the picture!

SORMA [*enters again*]. The carpenter —

RUSHKEWICZ. Quiet *please!* How can I devote myself to art? [*Waves Sorma out.*] You have not studied this part. You must live it night and day, you must starve yourself, deny yourself to learn what is the suffering!

MRS. WHITCOMB. Mr. Rushkewicz!

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! I cannot be disturbed, I rehearse!

GIRL IV [*in sobs*]. You'd better give my part to somebody else!

RUSHKEWICZ. To dictate to me no-one how the parts to be assigned are! [*Softening.*] But I like to see you cry. It show you have some feeling — You see? You see? A bit of artist show in her. It begin — You are to read books on Russia, on farming and on the farm animals to make a background in your mind.

GIRL IV. But there's nothing about animals in the lines.

RUSHKEWICZ. The author does not have to write it! The author he writes a skeleton, the players they are merely flesh, the scenery, it is the clothes, but the director adds what he wants. It is the director who melts all these elements together into the *great whole!*

SALLY. And the hole is the deficit!

SORMA [*enters again with drapes of different colors*]. Rudie, the carpenter.

RUSHKEWICZ. He must *wait!*

SORMA. And these colors, what lighting are you going to use?

RUSHKEWICZ. I rehearse!

SORMA. But unless you tell me I just can't go on —

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch, tsch, come here then, all of you! [*Chorus rises and in pantomime Rushkewicz and Sorma discuss colors on the girls.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, Miss Fentress, I'm afraid to tell Mr. Rushkewicz what I've done. I know I'm a traitor to the cause but my husband said he'd stop financing and I thought if we could sell out to Hawkins, you see he could just hitch this auditorium up to his moving-picture house next door.

SALLY. Mrs. Whitcomb, you won't sell us out? I'm denying myself more than I can tell you for this idea.

MRS. WHITCOMB [*wipes away a tear*]. I've worn my clothes the second season, I've practised countless economies too to help with the finance. But my husband says he can't send our third boy to college if [*weeps*] I am going to keep on feeding nuts.

SALLY. Mrs. Whitcomb, Mr. Hawkins will get this theatre only over my unconscious body!

MRS. WHITCOMB. But how can you finance —

SALLY. I don't know, but there is a good Providence that protects drunkards and fools. I don't know if we are intoxicated with ideals or just fools, but some way —

MRS. WHITCOMB. You make me very ashamed of myself.

SORMA [*enters from left*]. Rudie, please bring the stairs in and give me space to paint.

RUSHKEWICZ [*impatiently*]. Well, well, well, have the carpenter bring them in!

SORMA. The carpenter has gone long ago. We would have had to pay him union rates for waiting.

RUSHKEWICZ. Let Harry bring them in.

SORMA. He's redipping the amber bulbs. If you'll all help we can pull them in.

[*Chorus cheerfully and as if used to giving manual assistance hurries off stage to drag stairs in, several divisions of stairs.*]

RUSHKEWICZ. If it bends your back you can feel how it is to be a peasant who bends to till the soil.

SALLY. They need me. [*Goes to help cheerfully.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB [*finding herself alone*]. Oh, dear, I suppose I ought to help too. [*Goes to assist.*]

RUSHKEWICZ [*does not spare himself and gives a mighty shove*]. Pull again. You, not so much, you, more! That's it!

MRS. WHITCOMB. This is the first time I've moved scenery. Oh, there's a smudge on my cuff!

RUSHKEWICZ. Now that ramp on the other side, push it. Not that way, this way!

GIRL I. There aren't enough steps for us all to rush up and down on!

RUSHKEWICZ. It is the impression only we give. Five steps up it might mean a mountain top. Four slides down this ramp it might be a valley. The idea is show your bodies!

GIRL II. But how can I —

GIRL III. And where do I —

RUSHKEWICZ. This is the representation of a dance-hall; these levels different, the different classes of life, and you as the dance girls in your gay costumes you promenade up and down, forward and back. You will fill the back wall, not with paint and canvas, but with bodies breathing and pulsating, in sculptural effect. [*Is so intent upon posing the chorus that he does not see Hawkins.*]

[*Hawkins comes down the aisle of the theatre. He keeps his hat on and a cigar in his mouth throughout the following scene.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB [*nervously in a whisper*]. Oh, Mr. Hawkins, won't you sit down here, next to Miss Fentress. Mr. Rushkewicz is just having a rehearsal.

HAWKINS [*looks about*]. I came to take the dimensions.

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! Silence there! [*Does not look.*]

HAWKINS [*as if not hearing*]. Yeah, I could break a wall through there right into my foyer. [*His pronunciation rhymes with "lawyer."*]

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! Silence there!

MRS. WHITCOMB [*in whisper*]. Sit here. There's a rehearsal going on.

HAWKINS. What?

MRS. WHITCOMB. A rehearsal.

HAWKINS. Where?

MRS. WHITCOMB. On the stage.

HAWKINS. Where's the stage?

MRS. WHITCOMB. There.

HAWKINS. Oh, that platform. What are they doing with it?

MRS. WHITCOMB. This is our Little Theatre.

HAWKINS [*not understanding*]. Yeah?

SALLY. He doesn't understand a word you're saying.

MRS. WHITCOMB. Do you know what a Little Theatre is?

HAWKINS. Never saw one.

MRS. WHITCOMB. There are thousands of them all over the country.

HAWKINS. What?

SALLY. There are thousands of them all over the country.

HAWKINS. Country? Yes, the country's all right but I don't have time to get away from the show business.

MRS. WHITCOMB and SALLY. There are thousands of them all over the country!

HAWKINS. Thousands of what?

[*Mrs. Whitcomb and Sally sink back exhausted and look at each other.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB. Is it possible he doesn't know anything about Little Theatres?

SALLY. Mr. Hawkins, don't you know that for many, many years there have been experiments for truth and beauty for a public dissatisfied with what the commercial theatre has given, a public searching fearlessly for the spiritual satisfaction that can be derived from art in drama?

HAWKINS. What did she say?

MRS. WHITCOMB. She said — but how can I repeat — [*Hawkins wanders about looking at footlights.*]

SALLY. Don't try. If his ears cannot hear we shall have to wait for the day when his eyes will see!

[*Hawkins kicks the footlights.*]

MRS. WHITCOMB [*waves toward stage*]. They're rehearsing!

HAWKINS. Oh, you're getting up a school show.

RUSHKEWICZ. Silence! Tsch! who is this?

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, Mr. Rushkewicz, this is nice Mr. Hawkins. He's so interested in our theatre. I let him come in, because, because — my husband —

RUSHKEWICZ. Hawkins? Hawkins?

HAWKINS [*offers cards*]. That's me, firm of theatrical producers, owners of the Picture House next door, also

those great shows, "Girl of Sixteen," "Dolly Huggins," "Maid and Married," et cetera!

RUSHKEWICZ. I allow no strangers to watch!

MRS. WHITCOMB. I — I — thought he — m-m-might be able to help us!

HAWKINS. Sure. What ye want? A garden set with terrace? I can send you a few pieces. How about a white pergoler with roses and morning glories bobbing all over it, and I got a nice statue of Cupid and —

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! Tsch! Abominable, such scenery!

HAWKINS [*not hearing and continuing enthusiastically*]. I got a nice back drop with a mountain and a brook, spilling on to the stage into a real waterfall. They like anything real like water and rain. 'Course, what I got is too big for this little hole but we could cut it down. I won't charge nothin' and you can keep all the box receipts for your school treasury. How much do you charge, 25 cents?

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances to Mrs. Whitcomb*]. Why is it that you bring to insult me such a man!

MRS. WHITCOMB [*retreats*]. It wasn't for the setting — it was because —

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances*]. Enough I have had of this meddling! Have *you* been as apprentice like me in the experimental theatres in Europe? Do you know Stanislowsky and Nyesirovich?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*retreats about stage*]. No.

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances*]. Have you made your way through the original of Adolph Appia?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*retreats, getting weaker and more terrified*]. No.

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances, more and more dominatingly*]. Gordon Graig! Do you understand him?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*retreats*]. No, not exactly.

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances, talking louder and louder*]. The theatre of Jacques Copeau in Paris? Have you seen it?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*retreats*]. No.

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances*]. Wherein was Dantchenko wrong? Do you know?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*retreats*]. No.

RUSHKEWICZ [*advances, shouting*]. Have you witnessed a performance in the theatre of Meyerhold in Moscow?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*sinks into a chair*]. No.

RUSHKEWICZ [*raving*]. Tsch, tsch! How then *can* you give expression to opinion!

MRS. WHITCOMB. I just thought —

RUSHKEWICZ [*wildly emotional*]. But *I* know! I have experimented, meditated; translated into the imagination to which there is no limit! I cannot even be bounded by the sky. The background must have the immensity black of limitless void.

HAWKINS. What did you say?

RUSHKEWICZ. I will not have these interruptions! Chorus! Proceed!

[*Chorus take positions.*]

RUSHKEWICZ. You are in a dance-hall, paid for enticement. Now posed so you take the place of old-fashioned scenery. Exude now the waves magnetic of allurement; Anna, from the group draw away and approach me. "It is you I love."

ANNA [*one of the chorus, approaches him. Repeats while the chorus make the attempt desired but the effect is comic*]. Oh, Alexandrevitch, I love you, I love you, I love you with all the strength of love, with all the depths of my feelings, it is you, you alone I love, I love you, just you, you alone, it is you, you, I love!

HAWKINS. Why not just say "you're a great kid" and let it go?

MRS. WHITCOMB [*frightened*]. Oh, Mr. Hawkins, ssh, ssh!

RUSHKEWICZ. Tsch! I must have respectful silence! Chorus, now I stab Anna in distrust, you run with shrieks from side to side, up and down, the symbol of woe and fear. Off!

[*Chorus shriek in terror and surge with tremendous vigor all over the stage. Mrs. Whitcomb, Sally, and Hawkins retreat for safety.*]

RUSHKEWICZ. More emotion, more terror like the sweeping of the wind!

[*Chorus excitedly obey.*]

RUSHKEWICZ [*tearing around with chorus*]. Tsch! tsch! This *fourth* barrier! I want it broken! Forward, out, into the audience, down the aisles you shriek in madness!

[*Chorus rush shrieking into aisles.*]

JOHN [*who has entered unnoticed now walks forward from the back of the auditorium*]. Stop! There is not enough space! The audience —

RUSHKEWICZ [*excitedly*]. If there is not enough *space* the audience must be *removed!*

JOHN. If you continue this way there won't be enough audience to remove!

RUSHKEWICZ. You have no authority to interfere with my rehearsal.

JOHN. There is no excuse for this howling mob!

RUSHKEWICZ. No, you are against every innovation. I want to make this scene of terror the greatest that have ever been staged! I cannot do so if I stop at a fourth wall! The terror must break through and fill the entire auditorium!

JOHN. Even if it tears the clothes of the audience!

RUSHKEWICZ. If the audience impedes the expression of art, the audience will have to be suspended on movable platforms that can be raised in time to let the characters —

SALLY. Rush into the basement!

RUSHKEWICZ. No impudence from you!

JOHN. We do not talk like that to women in this country, Mr. Rushkewicz!

RUSHKEWICZ. There are a great many things you do not do in this country. You do not get a fundamental education to fit you to have any individual opinion. You are a country of sheep, baa — ba-a-a — baa. And you are so ignorant you don't know how ignorant you are! But you follow one another in a long procession, dressing alike, talking alike, living alike. Imitation! Imitation! The sheep, the sheep, on, on, all alike, following a leader. [*He seizes a girl and pushes her around the stage. She looks as startled as a sheep as she lets herself be guided.*]

JOHN. And because I do not choose to consider you a leader —

RUSHKEWICZ. So, it has come to defiance, has it? Your —

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, don't — don't —

HAWKINS. Atta-boy — atta-boy!

SALLY. Go to it, John!

RUSHKEWICZ [*turning upon Sally*]. So you're a traitor too. Well, you can go. We can get along without you!

JOHN. You can't dismiss Miss Fentress. She was appointed by the Board of Directors.

RUSHKEWICZ. Then I fire the Board of Directors!

JOHN. That will save them the trouble the other way around!

SORMA [*dramatically*]. Oh, you can't have an Art Theatre without Rudie. He's the only man who comes from Europe, who knows how to interpret the great foreign dramatists!

JOHN. None of this is going to be worth a pot of Indian beads until an Art Theatre like this begins to express the soil, seed, and harvest of our own Americans!

RUSHKEWICZ [*screams*]. *Now* he wants me to rehearse the *Red Skins!*

JOHN. Stop playing circus with yourself!

RUSHKEWICZ [*tears back and forth excitedly*]. I cannot be upset this way. My nerves are going — brrrrrrr — rrrrrrr — [*Shivers.*] all over my body! I am so sensitive! Through my finger tips to my heels I am washed as if with ice water!

JOHN. Nothing would please me more than to have you washed with water — and *plenty* of soap!

RUSHKEWICZ. From Satan himself I ask deliverance from these Puritans!

JOHN. Even Satan himself knows the difference between atmosphere and filth!

RUSHKEWICZ [*mockingly*]. Oh, yes, we are to buy the chorus white smocks and pose you with harps that you may sit on the stairs with the angels! It seems this Puritan is not willing to face life as it is!

JOHN. To face life squarely is one thing! To be a collector only of its dregs is another!

RUSHKEWICZ. Mrs. Whitcomb you are President of this organization. Tell the business manager to go about that business!

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, these differences of opinions are terrible! Do come with me, Mr. Cooper.

JOHN. But it has to be thrashed out! I have just returned from the bank. Under no conditions will they continue our credit.

MRS. WHITCOMB. That's why I brought in Mr. Hawkins to take over the lease!

HAWKINS. Yeah, I can break a wall right there and get extra space for gents coat room and foyer.

ALL TOGETHER

RUSHKEWICZ. He does not belong here!
SORMA. We cannot give this up!
SALLY. We won't let you do that!

HAWKINS. I didn't hear!

JOHN. We're not ready to sell yet, Mr. Hawkins, because I have taken over the lease myself!

SALLY [*joyously*]. Oh, John!

ALL TOGETHER

MRS. WHITCOMB. Oh, Mr. Cooper!
SORMA. You, Mr. Cooper!
RUSHKEWICZ. *You've* taken over the lease?

JOHN. Yes, I am the boss now it seems!

RUSHKEWICZ [*flings manuscript upon the floor*]. I *leave!*

SORMA [*hangs upon his arm*]. Oh, Rudie, you haven't a cent in the world!

RUSHKEWICZ [*scornfully*]. What is money? When I have the courage to starve for ideals?

SORMA. And he *has* starved! Oh, don't, don't put him out!

SALLY. Speak, speak for yourself, John!

JOHN. He can go or stay as he chooses but if he stays he takes advice from me!

RUSHKEWICZ. Take orders from you? I'll go rent a barn at the end of the alley!

HAWKINS. Sure, you can find a lot of ash cans there!

RUSHKEWICZ. Then we'll see who's the real director!

SALLY. Oh! John is a real director. He's very clever, Mr. Hawkins! Now you can produce the new play, John!

HAWKINS. I want to produce some new plays. Has he got any?

JOHN. Yes, one written by a woman in Kansas.

RUSHKEWICZ. Pah! Where is Kansas? One little state the rest of the world knows noting about! And what can you do with it for setting? They tell me Kansas is all flat, flat flat; I cannot group a chorus up and down in the background! Who, *who*, knows anything about *Kansas!*

HAWKINS. Kansas? Oh, boy! I do! I was born there! I'll come round tomorrow myself and start the rehearsals!

SORMA. No, no, not that commercial man!

HAWKINS. Say, listen, we'll make it a great show! Maybe land it in New York! Nothing to prevent us using this here school platform for a cradle for new plays? Say! That's a great idea! I've got some big ideas! You got to hand it to me!

SALLY [*enthusiastically*]. Oh, John! He sees! He *sees!*

HAWKINS. Sure, anyone that's run successful theatres like I have these twenty years has got to know *something,* sister!

RUSHKEWICZ. It is the end! How I have worked! Sleepless nights planning! In the day forcing from the strength within me to pour a semblance of genius into those silly girls! And what comes to me for it? Noting but the slammed door against a prophet!

JOHN. No door is slammed against you. I am willing to engage you as director on condition you —

RUSHKEWICZ. On no condition! Into the wilderness you have driven me!

JOHN. Oh! stop being upstage! Go back and read up on Antoine!

RUSHKEWICZ. What do *you* know about Antoine?

JOHN. His was revolt against the drama of his day. *He* was *genuine!* Stop being high hat and get back to the truth. Plans for this Russian play are off! Chorus, you may report for rehearsal tomorrow at ten. Mr. Rushkewicz will conduct a reading of the next play which will be "Flat Fields."

RUSHKEWICZ. No, not that! Not that! I cannot continue under such conditions!

SORMA. Rudie, be wise!

SALLY. Speak for *yourself*, John!

JOHN. *Not* for myself but the three of us together! Shake his hand, Rushkewicz.

RUSHKEWICZ. No! I will not vulgarize my art!

JOHN. Give him your hand, Hawkins!

HAWKINS. Sure, give me your mit. [*Grabs Rushkewicz's cringing hand.*]

SALLY. Oh! John — [*Plucks at his sleeve. She is near tears with the emotion of admiration.*] give me my ring.

CURTAIN

RHYTHM

A ONE-ACT PLAY

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BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Original production at the Romany Club, Chicago, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

AVERY, *a charming musician*. . . *Christopher J. Thomas*
CLAUDIA, *his charming wife*. . . . . *Charlotte Reynolds*
PLUNKET, *the eccentric friend*. . . . . *Sidney Slon*

SCENE: Before the fire-place in the living-room at evening.

RHYTHM

SCENE: *Before the fire-place in the living-room at evening. Avery is seated in an easy chair by the fire reading the newspaper. If the actor knows how, he plays the piano instead of reading a newspaper. What he plays must be classical. Claudia, opposite, looking beautiful in an evening gown, is writing a letter at a table.*

CLAUDIA. How do you spell "rhythm"?

AVERY [*teasingly, without looking up*]. The dictionary is on the shelf to the right.

CLAUDIA. It takes too long to run down the columns. [*Takes dictionary.*] I never remember whether it's rh or ry.

AVERY. I caught you asking Tommy to look up a telephone number. You wanted the classified plumbers and you couldn't remember if the word "plumber" was spelt with a "b."

CLAUDIA. Plumber shouldn't have a b. It's much too decorative!

AVERY [*turns a page*]. What are you doing with the word "rhythm" tonight?

CLAUDIA. Writing mother.

AVERY [*teasingly*]. Telling her, I suppose, that you'd like to go to Europe with her and leave your husband for a while, if not for ever?

CLAUDIA [*teasingly*]. Of course, I tell her that in every letter.

[*A bell rings.*]

CLAUDIA [*rises*]. Another interruption. I'll finish this upstairs. [*Takes letter and goes out right.*] It must be mailed tonight.

PLUNKET [*enters from left. He is whimsically sympathetic, one who lives through the lives of other*]. Well, well, well, to find you in, my dear Avery, what luck, luck, luck.

AVERY [*rises from newspaper or piano*]. Plunket! You!

PLUNKET. Me, me, me, me.

AVERY. Where on earth —

PLUNKET. From the ends of the earth —

AVERY. Why, it must be twenty odd years.

PLUNKET. Odd ones, indeed, very odd. I was sure we were going to exchange letters but we thinned out on them.

AVERY. Sit down, my dear fellow. It is good to see you again. Have a cigarette.

PLUNKET [*takes a cigarette and puts it into a very long holder*]. Comfortable room you have here, it has an air.

AVERY [*nodding assent*]. Claudia has ideas she likes to work out.

PLUNKET. Your wife? Yes, they all have ideas they like to work out. [*Sighs.*] They must stay awake nights inventing them.

AVERY [*lights the cigarette*]. Are these deductions from sinister experiences?

PLUNKET. It takes the unshackled man like myself to go into houses and observe the situation in true perspective.

AVERY. Perhaps.

PLUNKET. My mission in life is to make people happy.

AVERY [*takes armchair opposite Plunket*]. Can you do that?

PLUNKET. I have a theory that most people live on under stifling conditions which a mere word, when rightly spoken, could alter. My own marital adventure was so disastrous that I have dedicated myself to helping others. I've sat in on many a family squabble, even obligingly allowed myself to be used as a witness, in one case motored the wife home to her mother, in another case, took husband off to a much needed hegira at Deauville.

AVERY. Indeed.

PLUNKET. I'm an old hand at ironing out wrinkles in domestic linen in time to save it from being washed in public.

AVERY. Quite a novel occupation!

PLUNKET [*rises, leans against mantel*]. Avocation. Some people make hobbies of collecting scent bottles.

I dedicate myself to conserving the more fragile beauty of the aroma.

AVERY. Aroma?

PLUNKET. How often, how often have my nostrils inhaled the perfume of orange blossoms at the altar. Later, in the home, the fumes of bacon, onions, milk, and medicine!

AVERY [*rises, takes a small vase from the mantel and offers it to Plunket*]. Attar of roses.

PLUNKET [*inhales the perfume*]. Ah, an idea of your wife's?

AVERY. The idea of a wife? No, a gift from an old friend of mine.

PLUNKET. Woman?

AVERY [*nodding assent*]. She has a rose garden. I used to help her spray away the bugs.

PLUNKET. Still unmarried?

AVERY. No, now she has a husband who sprays away the bugs.

PLUNKET. But she sent you the aroma of your past together?

AVERY [*takes jar and inhales*]. Yes, I like to think that she and I can still remember.

PLUNKET. So! [*He is interested and walks about the room as if looking for trouble.*] Jolly to find you in. Don't know anyone else in town. Just have five hours between trains. Starting West at midnight,

opening agencies for electric clocks that only have to be wound every twenty years.

AVERY. What a relief! Send me one. I suppose it's a father-to-son legacy, the last one who winds it writes the date on the wall.

PLUNKET. We're installing them in hotels.

AVERY. Think of the time they will save, and the irritation. [*Retakes his chair.*]

PLUNKET [*retakes his chair*]. Avery, is life irritating to you, or have you somewhere the strengthening of love?

AVERY. Do you really want to know?

PLUNKET. Perhaps I am jealous about wanting to know. I couldn't keep love myself.

AVERY. I've never tried to reduce my emotions to a scientific analysis but offhand I should say her greatest gift to me is rhythm.

PLUNKET. Rhythm?

AVERY. We are in harmony. The mere presence of her is like the completion of a chord in music. The touch of her makes my blood sing. In each others arms we seem to swing with the universal metre.

PLUNKET. You make me dizzy.

AVERY. To my need of a mother's love, she responds at once. To my domination of a father she at once plays the child. When I am ready for the flute of Pan [*rises and snaps his fingers*] she is tiptoe ready for the dance. When I am weary she laughs farewell over a fleeing shoulder and leaves me alone.

PLUNKET. This is a goddess.

AVERY [*meditatively*]. She never will realize how near to *heaven* she has brought my human love.

PLUNKET. Beautiful, you say?

AVERY. If she is mischievous, there is Christmas candle light flickering in her eyes. In repose they are deep magnets drawing me to her. She wears her hair in different ways. The changes are alluring but always there is that same fundamental attunement to me.

PLUNKET [*rising to face Avery*]. This is marvellous, my dear Avery, and yet — tragic —

AVERY. Tragic?

[*Claudia enters from right with the sealed and stamped letter.*]

AVERY. Oh, Claudia, Mr. Plunket.

CLAUDIA. How do you do. Pardon me. Avery, I've an important letter to be mailed. Could you get a special delivery stamp at the drug store? I'm out of stamps.

AVERY [*takes letter from Claudia and explains to Plunket*]. Excuse me while I see this safely on its way. Claudia, will you be nice to him? You've heard me speak of Plunket, in the Class picture. [*Indicates a photograph of a group of college men. Exit left.*]

CLAUDIA. Oh, yes, you're right over in here, aren't you? [*The territory her hand covers is most of the picture as they scrutinize it together.*]

PLUNKET [*takes a gold pencil from his pocket and points*]. There I am, or, rather there I was, right there.

CLAUDIA. It's better to say that's what you were rather than what you are. We never are what we were, are we?

PLUNKET. I feel much the same, don't you?

CLAUDIA. No, I feel quite different. In those days I was searching for a reason, an answer, the total sum, the period to the sentence. Now, I ask no question, I seek no total sum, no sentence without a period.

PLUNKET. That is stagnation.

CLAUDIA. Am I too satisfied? Just *to be* seems all in all, just to be seems enough. If love has a fault, I wonder if that is love's fault.

PLUNKET. Ah, you are in love.

CLAUDIA. Very deeply. [*She stoops to place fresh wood upon the fire.*]

PLUNKET [*leans against the mantelpiece*]. Tell me about it. I am one who warms his heart at the glowing embers of the love affairs of others. Confide in me, what is he like?

CLAUDIA. I've never confessed to anyone before.

PLUNKET. I'll understand. They all tell *me*.

CLAUDIA [*sits upon a stool before the fire and seems to find in its flames the illumination of her own psychology*]. So much of my love rests upon the things he does not do and those he does not say. There is so

much between us that needs no speech. Somehow through the silence we hear each other perfectly. Through the noisiest day we can still feel our silence. Do you comprehend that?

PLUNKET. I never have experienced it.

CLAUDIA. When he is absent, I know he is with me. Distance does not take him away. Time would mean nothing if I did not have a wild heart that beats more quickly when he is present. You know how that is?

PLUNKET. I would if I too could find a woman with the light of Christmas candles in her eyes.

CLAUDIA. What an idea! I certainly have no eyes like that!

PLUNKET [*gives her a searching glance*]. No, you haven't.

CLAUDIA. I'm not pretty but he doesn't care. He's not extraordinary either, and yet, he is beautiful.

PLUNKET. What an adjective for a man! Can't you find a better?

CLAUDIA. No, there is a radiance in him and it is beautiful. He has charm, courage, unselfishness, integrity, and the beauty of immaculacy — there is a freshness and a fragrance —

PLUNKET. Fragrance! That's my mission in life, to conserve it. You love him enduringly? Not for any one physical feature but because all in all the essence of his soul melts perfectly with yours?

CLAUDIA. How well you express it. Through all eternity whether manifesting in flesh or just in etherial

vibration, we shall still be conscious of our need of each other.

PLUNKET. *Need*, exactly, and why should you be denied it? Why should you both endure for the sake of your vows the tragedy that lies between you? It is folly for two people to wear out their lives, earthbound, when each could soar to the stars with the real mate. Do not be distressed. You need dissemble no longer. I shall confide a secret which will free you. Your husband also, has been dissembling. He, too, has an affinity.

CLAUDIA [*rises*]. What?

PLUNKET. It surprises you. I got it out of him. There is a woman with the light of Christmas candles in her eyes and she is for him the highest star on the peak of the Christmas tree.

CLAUDIA. It's not true!

PLUNKET. In the same way he does not realize your love for another. The two of you have been masquerading, just waiting for *me* to blow in!

AVERY [*enters*]. Well, that letter is off and I collected a few snow flakes on the way.

CLAUDIA [*is doing the best she can to control herself*]. Mr. Plunket, there's a decanter in the dining-room. Do you mind helping yourself?

PLUNKET. Welcome announcement! Dear lady, I don't mind at all, at all, at all! [*Exit right.*]

AVERY. I'll help you. [*Starts to follow.*]

CLAUDIA. Avery, I want to talk to you —

AVERY. Just a moment —

CLAUDIA. I've got to talk to you.

AVERY [*startled*]. Why, you look ill.

CLAUDIA. I've decided to go to Europe.

AVERY. What?

CLAUDIA. I'm going to follow mother to Europe.

AVERY. What's the new game, darling?

CLAUDIA. I understand your allusions to my joining her. It's been your unexpressed wish. You've been wanting to get rid of me. I'm not one to stay where I'm not wanted. You can have your freedom as soon as I leave. But you might have the decency to be honest. Living a lie! I liked your not gushing over in words of affection; your deeds spoke instead, but it was only because you couldn't frame pretty speeches when you were saving them for somebody else.

AVERY [*smiling*]. Are you playing a new game with me?

CLAUDIA [*with increased emotion*]. Now I understand your facetiousness, glossing over your lies with an attempt at humor! Nothing but make-believe, an insult to my sincerity.

AVERY. Claudia! You are making unforgivable accusations! Have a care how you risk our love.

CLAUDIA. Yes, it's fragile enough, isn't it? I've been guarding it too tenderly, wrapping it in swansdown to shelter it from wintry blasts! Love isn't love that can't go naked through the storm!

AVERY. Wounds from exposure may heal but they also leave scars. I see no reason for this furious attack. It is the first one, Claudia!

CLAUDIA. What can you expect when it is you who have put the knife into my heart! A friend of yours, an utter stranger to me, comes into my house to tell me —

AVERY. Who told you what?

CLAUDIA. Don't ask dodging questions to gain time. He got it out of you about this other woman and he told *me!*

AVERY. Are you quite beside yourself?

CLAUDIA. Another question! Questions are not convincing!

AVERY [*angrily*]. I don't know what it's all about but whatever he said he has made a little *fool* of you!

CLAUDIA. That's right! Call me names! You've never done that before! [*Begins to weep.*]

AVERY. Then it's high time I begin! I thought you could be treated like an equal but you're reverting to primitive type and the old ancestors were right when they resorted to *beatings.* Do you think I admire this exhibition of *female flumadiddle?*

CLAUDIA [*incensed*]. What's that? You've never called me that before! What does it mean?

AVERY. If you studied the dictionary and learnt how to spell you wouldn't have to betray your ignorance!

PLUNKET [*appears right, with high-ball glass in hand*]. I thought you were coming in.

CLAUDIA. He told me about her! Ask him to deny it!

AVERY [*sternly*]. What's this you've stirred up Plunket? About my caring for somebody else? She's raving in tears!

[*The rest of the play is fast in tempo.*]

PLUNKET. In tears? My dear fellow, she's staging a scene, so as not to make it too hard for you when I reveal her secret that she, too, has found love elsewhere.

AVERY [*yells*]. What?

PLUNKET. You ought to be delighted. She has another love as deeply important to her as yours is to you!

AVERY. There is another man —

CLAUDIA. No, no, no!

PLUNKET [*keeping a hand on each, thus keeping them apart*]. Habit makes her deny it! I arrived in time. Your period of hypocrisy is over. I give you your freedom! I congratulate each of you upon the new combination and wish you eternal happiness!

AVERY. There is someone else?

CLAUDIA. No, no, no! I never could love anyone else but you, but he told me that you had found someone else.

AVERY. But Claudia, for me you are every woman in the world.

PLUNKET. But just a while ago each of you was raving to the skies about your love —

CLAUDIA. But I was talking about Avery.

AVERY. And I was talking about Claudia.

PLUNKET. And all the time you meant your own husband?

CLAUDIA. Yes, yes!

PLUNKET. And you your own wife?

AVERY. Of course my own wife!

CLAUDIA. Oh, Avery did you mean me?

AVERY [*opens his arms*]. Is speech necessary between us?

CLAUDIA [*flings herself passionately into Avery's arms*]. Oh, Avery!

[*Avery embraces her divinely.*]

PLUNKET [*beats his own head and sinks down upon the fire bench or, if the play began with the piano, his elbow smashes upon the keys in discord as he sinks upon the chair*]. I didn't know it *could exist* — between *husband* and WIFE!

CURTAIN

THE OPERA MATINÉE

A ONE-ACT SOCIAL SATIRE FOR FOURTEEN WOMEN

COPYRIGHT 1925
BY ALICE GERSTENBERG
UNDER THE TITLE "FROM AFAR"

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BY NORMAN LEE SWARTOUT

Original productions of *The Opera Matineé* were given by the Twentieth Century Club, Detroit, The Wednesday Club and the College Club in Chicago.

CHARACTERS

EDITH *is cynical and languid, speaks more or less on one note.*

NARCISSA *is good-natured, speaks with a lisp.*

SHEILA *is stage-struck, speaks in round, open tones.*

SYDNEY *is pert, speaks with a crisp pronunciation.*

[THESE FOUR FASHIONABLE YOUNG GIRLS OCCUPY BOX I]

MRS. HARRISON *uses soft tones of flattery.*

MRS. LYSANDER *is dominatingly self-appointed.*

MRS. MURPHY *is excitable and distrait.*

COUNTESS JERABEK *comes from everywhere and nowhere; her accent is mixed foreign. She is exotic, fascinating, dressed in the extreme of fashion. She rolls her "r's" with compelling charm.*

[THESE FOUR FASHIONABLE WOMEN OCCUPY BOX II]

MRS. CASPER *has a sense of humor, a becoming gown, and the title of President of a Woman's Club.*

MRS. GARDINER *came from the West but her sympathies from the world and she looks very smart on a political platform.*

MRS. KENNEDY *radiates the joy and ease of Southern sociability.*

MRS. VAIL *is a charming aristocrat. Whether born or bred is of no consequence. She speaks with a slightly foreign accent.*

[THESE FOUR FASHIONABLE WOMEN OCCUPY BOX III]

TWO REPORTERS *complete the cast, pretty women, smartly dressed and refined in manner. One is from the* Morning Moon, *the other from the* Mira Star.

SCENE: Three opera boxes.

THE OPERA MATINÉE

SCENE: *Three opera boxes fill a Little Theatre or a Studio stage or platform, counting from right to left, I, II, III, from the point of view of the players. The illusion of boxes can be created simply by placing a low scenic wall or stretching a rope across the width of the stage or platform close to its edge and covering with material or portieres; red velvet is especially reminiscent of opera boxes.*

Between the boxes are elbow-high partitions. These may be suggested by the action of the players if the front wall is high enough to mask their lack.

The back of the stage is draped in portieres, a parted pair making an entrance to each box.

When the curtain rises ten women are seated in the boxes facing the audience.

Sheila sits at the right in Box I, Sydney to her left and partly back. Edith sits at the left in Box I, with Narcissa to her right and slightly back.

Mrs. Harrison sits at the right in Box II and Mrs. Lysander at the left in Box II. There are two empty chairs behind them.

Mrs. Casper sits at the right in Box III, Mrs. Gardiner to her left and partly back. Mrs. Vail sits at the left in Box III, Mrs. Kennedy to her right and slightly back.

They listen with varying facial expressions to the opera. A phonograph record off-stage is just finishing "Oh kindly Heavens," "O quant' occhi fissi" from Madam Butterfly, *Puccini, Act I.*

Sheila, Mrs. Harrison, Mrs. Gardiner use opera glasses; Mrs. Lysander uses lorgnettes.

When the music ceases the women chatter and their white-kid-gloved hands give enthusiastic applause. Out of a medley of voices one finally understands the following:

MRS. CASPER. Isn't it glorious?

MRS. LYSANDER. He's never been in better voice.

SHEILA. It's perfectly divine!

NARCISSA [*lisping*]. We mutht applaud.

[*Applause is repeated.*]

MRS. VAIL. They're coming out again.

MRS. HARRISON. What a triumph!

MRS. KENNEDY. She's too fat this year.

MRS. GARDINER. They say she takes a spoonful of vaseline before each meal.

MRS. CASPER. To smooth her voice?

MRS. GARDINER. No, to line her stomach.

MRS. KENNEDY. I'd rather stick to lamb chops and pineapple.

SYDNEY. He's good-looking, don't you think?

SHEILA. Oh, I wish I were an opera star!

SYDNEY. Never mind, you look it!

SHEILA. Oh, do you think I do? How wonderful!

[*Applause is repeated.*]

MRS. KENNEDY. We've had a marvellous opera season!

MRS. VAIL. Yes, I've been counting the artists; we've had Telapalinie and Krzeminski and —

MRS. GARDINER. Michel *Obrien* —

MRS. CASPER. Spagettelio and Henri Sevigne —

MRS. KENNEDY. Miriam Moss and Tattititazza.

MRS. LYSANDER. We haven't had the best artists this year. I don't know why they give us Miriam Moss so much. She must be having a love affair with somebody.

MRS. HARRISON. Don't you think she has quite an unusual soprano voice?

MRS. LYSANDER. They won't have her in South America, and here she gets a thousand a night.

SHEILA. I'm so glad you invited me, Narcissa. Every matinée is a sell-out! I did so want to hear *Butterfly* this afternoon. You know I'm studying it.

MRS. GARDINER. It's too bad they didn't give us *The Ring* this year.

MRS. VAIL. They gave us three novelties, about as much as they could afford out of the guarantee fund.

MRS. LYSANDER. After all the work I've put into selling boxes and raising money, it's the worst season

they've given us. No new operas and only second-rate artists. I'm going to make a big howl about it in Committee meeting.

MRS. HARRISON. Maybe they're doing the best they can.

MRS. GARDINER. Oh, now in the next act we're going to have that lovely scene where she stands at the Japanese window waiting for him to come.

MRS. VAIL. One of the most poignant scenes in opera.

MRS. KENNEDY. It always gets me. I feel so sorry for her, tears just roll down my cheeks. And I've only a small handkerchief.

MRS. GARDINER. It's terribly sad having her waiting, waiting, at the window when he does not come!

MRS. CASPER [*impishly*]. Well, I don't know which is worse, waiting for him when he doesn't come or having to greet him when he does!

MRS. LYSANDER. The guarantors can thank *me* for this sold-out house.

MRS. HARRISON. Oh, Mrs. Lysander, no-one dares refuse you.

MRS. CASPER. Did you drop something, Mrs. Vail?

MRS. VAIL [*has arisen to adjust her cloak over the back of her chair*]. My coat slipped.

MRS. LYSANDER. I sold five boxes myself, that is, not quite five, well — four and a half. [*She turns her head to the left and her eyes meet those of Mrs. Vail, who is standing.*]

MRS. VAIL [*politely but with reserve*]. How do you do, Mrs. Lysander.

[*Mrs. Lysander takes no notice of the greeting and continues pantomime conversation with Mrs. Harrison. As the dialogue flits from box to box the characters sustain the pantomime of continued conversation and interest within their own box.*]

MRS. VAIL. Mrs. Kennedy, isn't that Mrs. Lysander in the box next to us?

MRS. KENNEDY. Yes, of course it is. What's the matter with her?

MRS. GARDINER. She gave you a direct cut!

MRS. CASPER. Mrs. Vail, I'm — I'm gasping at her rudeness!

MRS. VAIL [*embarrassed*]. I was merely trying to be courteous. I — it — well —

MRS. KENNEDY. Don't bother about Mrs. Lysander, she only talks to six people in the entire town!

MRS. VAIL. I assure you I have no interest in Mrs. Lysander's social recognition but when one has occupied the same booth at a bazaar for three days and been in constant consultation with her, good breeding would seem to demand —

MRS. KENNEDY. Don't you know some people only retain their own position by keeping others out?

MRS. GARDINER. Well, Mrs. Lysander wasn't born to the purple.

Mrs. Casper. Those who are, don't need to flaunt it. I'm always suspicious of people like Mrs. Lysander. Her father was a station master in a small town. The best thing she ever did was to take one of the trains and elope with Jake.

Narcissa. There's the little Hapgood debutante.

Sydney. Are you going to her tea next week?

Edith. I wouldn't bother with the Hapgoods. That's the day of the Allen-Flinn wedding.

Narcissa. I'm going to both.

Sydney. You're too nice to people, Narcissa.

Mrs. Lysander. So I said to him it wasn't enough for him to live on his father's name.

Mrs. Harrison. You always find such clever arguments.

Mrs. Lysander. The new generation forgets unless it sees the old names on the opera boxes. They are wiped out by the newcomers.

Mrs. Harrison. Mrs. Lysander, in the box next to us, isn't that that Mrs. Vail who helped us in our bazaar booth for the hospital last winter?

Mrs. Lysander. Yes, it is.

Mrs. Harrison. Whose box is she in?

Mrs. Lysander. I've never inquired who has that box.

Sheila. Oh, I can't get the music out of my head! I want to get right up and sing! Did you watch how the singers place their voices? [*She makes a, e, i, o, u sounds and shows her teeth.*]

MRS. CASPER. I don't know why Mrs. Lysander should appoint herself as public censor of social class. I don't like to say it but one of *my* ancestors helped to *bulge* the Mayflower!

MRS. VAIL. She boasts she's related to Hoover.

MRS. CASPER. My dear, she's been related to every President since Cleveland.

MRS. VAIL. She probably considers me just the wife of a professor.

MRS. KENNEDY. But, Mrs. Vail, your husband holds an honored position in the University.

MRS. VAIL. A Professor of Latin, I suppose, seems more dead than alive to a woman like Mrs. Lysander.

MRS. KENNEDY. There isn't a couple in the University circle more popular than you and Mr. Vail.

MRS. VAIL. I'm really not complaining. My life is happy with friendships and the real things that count. An incident like this is silly. It doesn't really bother me, although it's not just pleasant.

EDITH. Narcissa, did you buy that gown at Hohenherbers?

NARCISSA. Don't you accuth me of exthravagance! I've gone through that with father already.

MRS. LYSANDER. I'm beginning to be anxious about the Countess.

MRS. HARRISON. Perhaps she lost her way.

MRS. LYSANDER. Oh, no, Mrs. Murphy was going to call for her at the Harringtons'. They said they would

be late. It seems the Countess doesn't get up until eleven o'clock and goes through all kinds of Parisian beauty exercises. She said she never felt fit in time for matinées.

MRS. HARRISON. She says life doesn't begin until the crystal chandeliers are ablaze with light.

MRS. LYSANDER. She is accustomed to the most brilliant courts of Europe.

SHEILA [*unceremoniously deprives Edith of the vanity mirror she has taken out to use for the powdering of her nose*]. Give me that a moment. [*She uses the mirror to watch the shaping of her lips into vowels.*]

MRS. KENNEDY. In the South where I come from we like to be friendly. I don't understand this northern chilly fashion.

MRS. VAIL. Next time I shall know better than to bow at all!

SYDNEY. For goodness' sakes, Sheila, if you're going to look like an advertisement for tooth paste, get up and go to the back of the box.

SHEILA [*tosses mirror into Edith's lap*]. Good idea! There's a bigger mirror there. [*Goes to back of box.*]

MRS. HARRISON. There's Hester Drury looking up at us.

MRS. LYSANDER. Where?

MRS. HARRISON. Fourth seat, tenth row, in black velvet.

MRS. LYSANDER. I see. [*Bows without a smile.*]

MRS. HARRISON [*bows with a smile*]. How do you do.

EDITH. Sheila's such a nut!

SYDNEY. Why do you ask her?

NARCISSA. I don't know. I suppose we like some people just because they *are* nuts.

MRS. LYSANDER. Yes, I think the Countess is extremely beautiful.

MRS. HARRISON. I thought extreme, rather than beautiful.

MRS. LYSANDER. The sophisticated type of beauty in Europe. Our eyes here are too Provincial.

MRS. HARRISON. I wish she would come. I feel so privileged to meet her again. Mrs. Lysander, you always have such important people about you.

MRS. LYSANDER. That is accomplished by eliminating the others.

MRS. KENNEDY. Mrs. Vail, at a dinner the other evening, the talk centred on you.

MRS. VAIL. And why me?

MRS. KENNEDY. We agreed, unanimously, that you were the most distinguished woman of our acquaintance.

MRS. VAIL. Oh, Mrs. Kennedy.

MRS. GARDINER. It's quite true. You have tact, a manner which is the height of refinement and charm.

MRS. CASPER. She speaks four languages; it's all I can do to tell a joke in *one!*

Mrs. Vail. Oh, but that's not to my credit. When my father died in Iowa —

Mrs. Gardiner. Oh, you were born in Iowa?

Mrs. Vail. Yes, I am of the mid-west, but when my father died, my mother knew she could educate my sister and me to better advantage on a small income in Paris. My sister was five years old and I was only three. We both married young, I to my Latin Professor at the Sorbonne and she to an Italian student there.

Mrs. Casper. I like to hear your slightly foreign accent.

Mrs. Vail. I've tried to get rid of it, but childhood training for correct pronunciation in French, Italian, and —

Sheila. Come on out and promenade. [*Exit back centre of Box I.*]

Narcissa. Leths do that. [*Exit.*]

Sydney. It's centainly a manless matinée. [*Exit.*]

Edith. Let's try our luck. [*Exit.*]

Mrs. Lysander. They ought to be here by this time. It's distressing enough to have the Countess miss the first act but really —

Mrs. Harrison. I've heard the Countess is no respecter of persons. She goes according to her own will.

Mrs. Lysander. And well she might. Kings and Queens have dined with her on her estate.

Mrs. Vail. No, my sister's husband died in the war. Then she married a Swiss. There was some espionage

trouble. Correspondence between us became treacherous. Our interests were very far apart. The last I heard she was leading an adventurous life in the Balkans. Married again, I suppose. I have no name, no address.

MRS. KENNEDY. How romantic! Do you think your sister became an adventuress?

MRS. CASPER. Oh, do you?

MRS. VAIL. She was very clever, very skillful in intrigue, and she had a personal magnetism that seemed to weaken people she wanted to bend her way. As a child I drew away from her in subconscious self-defense.

MRS. KENNEDY. You may not be aware of it but you have some such charm.

MRS. GARDINER. Yes, you have, quiet but compelling.

MRS. VAIL. I hope not. It may sound unnatural but I am glad my sister and I are far apart. I never felt she would use her talent for any human good.

[*Reporter of the* Morning Moon *enters Box I with pad and pencil.*]

[*Reporter of the* Mira Star *enters Box I with pad and pencil.*]

M. S. Hello, Morning Moon.

M. M. Hello, Mira Star.

M. S. Have you found a scoop? What's the chatter? Anything spicy for my column?

M. M. Same people, same names. Why should a few grab all the limelight?

M. S. Why do you give it to them? *You* can keep them out. Haven't you an engagement, a divorce, or even a remarriage?

M. M. Can't pick up a thing. I phone and phone. Why some people have homes is more than I can make out. They're never in them.

M. S. Yes, and if you do get an answer it's either bed or tub.

M. M. Who's sitting in this box?

M. S. [*flaps portiere to read placard on its back*]. Fotheringay. That means the fair Narcissa.

M. M. Who's she apt to have with her?

M. S. Oh, maybe that crazy Sheila Lowell.

M. M. I wish *I* had been *born* to millions.

M. S. It's a better wish to want to *die* in them.

M. M. Then I still have hope.

M. S. I'll guess a few good names and pile them in.

M. M. Narcissa won't care. She's a thoroughbred.

[*The reporters take the back seats in the box and silently compare notes and their information about the audience.*]

Mrs. Harrison. Just where in Poland is the Countess's estate?

Mrs. Lysander. It's one of those places near Russia. May not be Poland at all. I get so mixed up over the new divisions since the war. It has some unpronounce-

able name. When they mention these places I merely nod and acquiesce. There's no use trying to remember.

MRS. KENNEDY. Mrs. Vail, if I ever get a chance to pay Mrs. Lysander back for that insult to you I shall relish the experience.

MRS. GARDINER. I assure you we shall leave no stone unturned to bring her to terms.

MRS. VAIL. Please, please, don't put too much importance to it!

MRS. KENNEDY. She should have acknowledged your bow.

MRS. CASPER. That's Mrs. Lysander's way. She seems to take delight in ignoring people. Of course, I always blame such actions upon defective gland secretions. You know if people like that had their glands attended to —

SYDNEY [*enters Box I*]. I saw you coming to the box. You want to know Narcissa's guests, don't you? Well, there's Sheila Lowell, Edith Fickinger, and I'm Sydney, spelt S-y-d-n-e-y, Lenormand, L-e-n-o-r-m-a-n-d, *Miss* Sydney Lenormand. [*Smiles and goes out.*]

M. S. Well, she'll *miss* all right.

M. M. Are you going to leave her out?

M. S. Leave her out when she's so anxious to get in? I should say I *am.*

M. M. That Lysander woman next to us, how I don't love her!

M. S. You speak with feeling.

M. M. She's the kind that thinks she's going to stand with Peter at the gate and tell him which of her crowd she wants taken in.

M. S. Who's the woman next to Mrs. Kennedy?

M. M. She isn't seen around much, hasn't money, wife of a Prof at the U. I was sent to her house once to get data about the Gymnasium endowment and she sat and talked to me as if I were a human being and she wasn't patronizing about it either. I'd like to boom her social stock! If I ever get a chance to advertise her my ink is going to flow like sweet milk!

M. S. If you feel that way about it, I'll help you boom her? What's her name?

M. M. Vail, V-a-i-l.

M. S. Vail, I'll remember. [*Exit with M. M.*]

Mrs. Lysander. I'm planning a ball in honor of the Countess. They fêted her extravagantly in the East and we ought not to be less impressive. You know she was the intimate of Marie of Roumania. She wears an ivory miniature surrounded by rubies given to her by the late Tsar. She had a Russian husband influential in the inner court circles.

M. S. [*enters Box II*]. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lysander, may I — Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Harrison.

Mrs. Harrison. Young woman, when you mention me again, kindly remember I am the first Mrs. Archibald Harrison.

M. S. I'm sorry about that mistake. Of course, everybody knows you are *the* Mrs. Harrison. You see it was a new reporter we were training in.

[*M. M. meanwhile has entered Box III and is recording names.*]

MRS. LYSANDER. I am expecting Mrs. Murphy and Countess Jerabek.

M. S. Oh, Countess Jerabek! She's beautiful, isn't she? How do you spell it?

MRS. KENNEDY. Does it really help you to have our names?

MRS. GARDINER. Why should the public be interested?

M. M. You'd be surprised to know how many readers there are for the society column. It's the only exhaust we have for public imagination in this country for pageantry.

MRS. VAIL. Oh, I remember you told me that, the day you came to my house about the Gymnasium.

M. M. Thank you for remembering me, Mrs. Vail. [*Exit.*]

[*M. S., at the same time, leaves Box II.*]

MRS. LYSANDER. Such a nuisance! They don't know how to spell! Why should I know how to spell for them?

[*Sheila enters Box I.*]

EDITH [*enters Box I*]. The bell couldn't have rung. You must have ringing in your head, Sheila.

SHEILA. I was sure I heard the bell ring and I don't want to miss a note of the opera.

SYDNEY [*enters and resumes her seat*]. We could have walked longer. I told you the intermissions are beastly.

NARCISSA [*enters and resumes her seat*]. If we had just crothed the foyer to the left we would have run right into him, and I could have introduthed you.

SYDNEY. And I'm perishing to meet him.

MRS. LYSANDER. Oh, at last! [*Rises.*]

MRS. HARRISON [*with a flutter*]. Oh, here they are! [*Rises.*]

MRS. MURPHY [*holds the portieres aside and allows the Countess to enter*]. Countess, Mrs. Lysander, Mrs. Harrison.

MRS. LYSANDER *and* MRS. HARRISON. Oh, Countess!

COUNTESS [*enters with extended hand*]. Ah, *charmée* Madame Lysander, Madame Harrison.

MRS. LYSANDER. Oh, Countess, this chair? [*Offers chair just vacated by Mrs. Harrison who retreats to the chair behind.*]

COUNTESS. Thank you.

MRS. HARRISON [*offers programme*]. A programme, Countess.

COUNTESS. Oh, never mind zee programme. I know most of zee artists.

MRS. LYSANDER [*resumes her seat*]. I suppose you do, Countess.

COUNTESS. I have met zem on many ships. In the old days in Vienna — [*Her glance embraces the opera house, and she sighs.*] The world is not the same as it was. Ah well, it ees a pleasure to spend an hour with you. My dear Mrs. Murphy was a leetle worried that

I miss the first act, but you must know I have heard opera so many times before in all the capitals of Europe. [*She speaks with gestures and eye-glances and pauses aimed to attract the attention of the audience.*] There we go with leisure to enjoy an aria or two. It is all so different from your — your ways here. You have a big opera house.

MRS. LYSANDER. Our Saturday matinées are always very fashionable.

COUNTESS. So! So! Many women! Yes?

MRS. HARRISON. Our husbands are busy.

COUNTESS. Oh, yes, so I hear, always busy. Maybe not so much. [*Shrugs her shoulders and smiles wisely with amusing recollection.*] *I* find not *all* zee men so busy. Some of them have very good secretaries. I think you call zem the day-time wife. [*She regards the house.*]

MRS. MURPHY [*aside to Mrs. Lysander as she revives in the seat to Mrs. Lysander's right and slightly back*]. I did the best I could, Laura, but she doesn't come out, it seems, until she's had a perfume bath or something. I'm exhausted waiting.

SYDNEY. Sheila, what's the matter? Don't fall out of the box!

SHEILA. Don't you know who that is?

NARCISSA. Who ith who?

SHEILA. In the next box.

EDITH. What! Is it really?

SHEILA. Countess Jerabek. Didn't you read about her in the paper and see her picture? Isn't she gorgeous?

EDITH. Well, Sheila, it won't help your family if you fall *out* of the box. Narcissa hasn't got you *insured!*

SHEILA. Oh, if I only *looked* like that I know I could *sing!*

MRS. MURPHY. The Countess creates a sensation wherever she goes. You should have seen people stare at us. Of course, she was headlined in the papers this morning. Watch the audience turning toward us. They've caught on that we have her.

MRS. KENNEDY. Do you know who I think that is with Mrs. Lysander?

MRS. VAIL. I can't see, Mrs. Lysander is in the way.

MRS. CASPER. Who?

MRS. KENNEDY. That Countess Jerabek everybody is making such a fuss over.

MRS. VAIL. Who is she?

MRS. GARDINER. I read a long account in the paper this morning. It seems she is very important. They are arranging a tea for her at the Woman's Club.

MRS. CASPER. Oh, I read she's had her eyebrows plucked, her face lifted, and her lips peeled.

MRS. VAIL. Peeled?

MRS. CASPER. It's the latest thing! I suppose it provides a cherry-colored smile.

MRS. GARDINER. I've never seen anyone with a face lifted.

MRS. CASPER. Oh, I have. It seems to give them a lifted look of perpetual surprise.

MRS. KENNEDY. Just look at Mrs. Lysander fawn all over her! It makes me furious! Just because a countess comes from over the seas! How do we know she *is* a countess? And here is Mrs. Vail, worth more than a dozen countesses!

MRS. VAIL [*with some sadness*]. But your Mrs. Vail is here at home. She does not come from afar trailing clouds of glory. She does not come powdered with star-dust from foreign courts; what star-dust she tries to achieve out of her own soul is of no value. She can be brushed aside with a stare.

MRS. CASPER. Oh, Mrs. Vail, I don't think the world is much concerned with star-dust. The gleam is too fine. It wants the sound of brass and the blowing of horns. I'm all for raising mine and proclaiming to the entire house, "Look at us! *We've* got Mrs. *Vail!*"

MRS. KENNEDY. That would be a sensation. Helen, let's stand up and shriek, "Mrs. Vail!"

MRS. GARDINER. Oh, what a jolly article for the papers in the morning! "Three dignified women suddenly went quite mad, arose in the box and waving handkerchiefs hurrahed for Mrs. Vail. And the crowd got to its feet and in turn it shrieked, 'Who is Mrs. Vail?' And the three women cried, 'Behold, she is our friend, the finest of women!'"

MRS. CASPER. Be still, Edna, Mrs. Vail has gone white. Are you ill?

MRS. VAIL [*is looking at the Countess, and she has become incapable of speech*]. Oh!

MRS. LYSANDER. But I am sure, Countess, when I was in Paris that negligée shop was at the right of the Place Vendôme.

COUNTESS. No, no, madame, you do not know Paris like I know it. I was born in Paris, madame. I live my girlhood in Italy, my summers in Switzerland, and then come the war, and my husband, he die, and then Count Jerabek come and offer me all his great alliances. [*Her glance sweeps the opera house.*]

SHEILA. Can you see her eyelashes? They must be two inches long.

SYDNEY. What eyes! Eyes that can make an empire.

EDITH. Or ruin one!

COUNTESS. And now I shall be so happy when through your kindness and your heart for the suffering humanity in our poor desolate Russia, and all your *charmants amis* in this great country give unto the fund.

MRS. KENNEDY. Mrs. Vail, what is it?

MRS. CASPER. Shall I get some water?

MRS. VAIL. No, no, thank you. Just a moment — just a moment — it is — it is — nothing.

MRS. GARDINER. I was much too gay in what I said. I'm sorry.

COUNTESS. I shall go back with the bread in my hands *pour les pauvres!* Ah, Madame Lysander, the Tsarina, she used to say to me, we drink tea together you know,

most informal; you know my husband, he was — Oh, it is too much pain for me to relate — You have a pretty opera house and very lovely women. [*Her eyes rove about.*] Very lovely women! All, they look so young. Next to your box here, you have some friends? [*Her eyes glance at the women in Box III, and finally fasten steadily upon Mrs. Vail.*]

Mrs. Lysander. The box next to mine? Really, I don't know, I haven't met — you see we don't —

[*Countess rises with an exclamation and crosses toward Box III. Mrs. Lysander rises also and gives place with a look of questioning.*]

Countess. *Oh, ma foi! C'est Pauline!*

[*Mrs. Vail rises and approaches Box II. Mrs. Casper rises and gives place with a quick expression of surprise. Mrs. Gardiner and Mrs. Kennedy and the others in Boxes II and III concentrate upon the Countess and Mrs. Vail.*]

Countess. *C'est Pauline!* [*Across the partition she kisses Mrs. Vail on both cheeks, foreign fashion.*]

Mrs. Vail. *Marie! Marie, c'est toi!*

Mrs. Lysander. You know? You know —

Countess. Madame, it is my great joy! I introduce to you — my *sistaire!*

Mrs. Lysander. Your sister!

Mrs. Gardiner *and* Mrs. Casper. Sister!

Mrs. Lysander. Your sister? Oh, indeed! Oh, *how do you do,* Mrs. Vail. [*Extends her hand.*]

[*Mrs. Vail accepts the handshake with polite dignity, nothing more.*]

COUNTESS. *Mais Pauline, chérie,* how does this happen? Come out, talk to me. [*She goes to the back of Box II, and Mrs. Vail goes to the back of Box III. The phonograph off stage starts with the record of "Some Day He'll Come," "Un Bel di vedremo," Act II of* Madam Butterfly, *Puccini.*]

MRS. LYSANDER. Oh, Countess, the second act is starting.

COUNTESS. Oh, madame, zee opera I have heard before, but my sistaire I have not seen for many, many years. [*Exit.*]

[*Exit Mrs. Vail.*]

MRS. LYSANDER [*cannot regain her poise. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Harrison watch her out of the corners of their eyes*]. Who would have thought that Mrs. Vail was related to the Countess! Her sister! Think of it! And I didn't know it!

MRS. KENNEDY [*leans toward Mrs. Gardiner to whisper laughingly*]. You don't have to get up and shriek it, Edna; the papers will do that for you in the morning.

MRS. GARDINER [*is convulsed with silent laughter*]. Helen, Mrs. Vail's position is made! The sister of a Countess!

MRS. CASPER [*with a suppressed chuckle*]. We'll keep it dark, girls, that they were born in *Iowa!*

[*The music draws their attention to the stage and the pantomime recalls the opening tableau, as the lights lower and the curtain falls.*]

AT THE CLUB

A ONE-ACT PLAY FOR FIVE MEN

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BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Original production under the direction of Lionel Robertson in the Ravinia Workshop, Ravinia, Ill.

CHARACTERS

GITTENS, *an old servant at the club*
BURT PRENTICE, *a bachelor*
EBEN WHITMARSH, *a married man*
GLENN SHERMAN, *a married man*
ADIN BOYD, *a bachelor*

SCENE: Lounge of a man's club on a hot Monday night in summer.

AT THE CLUB

SCENE: *Lounge of a man's club on a hot Monday night in summer. When the curtain rises Gittens is trying needlessly to straighten a room which is precisely perfect. He distributes palm-leaf fans upon tables and chairs. He is bored, looks at the clock, walks to a window and gazes out idly. There are street lights outside and one hears the noises of a city on a hot night. Gittens mops his brow and sighs. Prentice enters from back right, crosses to the table at centre to strike a match. He is about thirty-eight, a magnetic man of action with the self-assurance of integrity. He is, however, trying to conceal anxiety.*

GITTENS [*hearing the striking of a match turns with an exclamation of pleasure at this interruption of his loneliness*]. Oh, Mr. Prentice.

PRENTICE. Evening, Gittens.

GITTENS. Can I do anything for you, sir?

PRENTICE. You haven't any message for me, have you?

GITTENS. Shall I inquire at the office? [*Starts back right.*]

PRENTICE. There's no mail there. I just came in. I am expecting a message.

GITTENS. Did you have a nice week-end, sir?

PRENTICE. Not very. House-parties bore me.

GITTENS. It was very hot here in town, sir. The club is very lonely week-ends with everybody away.

PRENTICE. Don't you get a vacation? [*Glances at a newspaper on the table.*]

GITTENS. Yes sir, but I don't know where to go. When my wife was alive, she took the children out to a camp but they are grown up now and go off by themselves; I'm not young enough any more to rough it. The Club beds are good. I've been here forty years, sir.

PRENTICE. Then you are acquainted with all the scandal of the town.

GITTENS. Enough, sir, to know that the secrets of men's souls wouldn't seem so bad if one knew all the reasons.

PRENTICE [*looking up from the paper*]. The secrets of men's souls — if one knew all the reasons. You're a philosopher, Gittens.

GITTENS. I have time to think and no worries of my own. I have my comforts here and the menu is excellent. I'm a gourmand, sir.

PRENTICE [*laughs*]. Are you?

GITTENS. I cultivated a taste like Mr. Cadwallider's.

PRENTICE. Old Cadwallider? Died of apoplexy.

GITTENS. He used to send the chef a fifty-dollar bill to cook some recipe he brought from foreign countries, and I was the only one, connoisseur enough, to want to eat what was left. He knew all about sauces! And how he enjoyed watching his coffee burn with spices in a silver

bowl! He enjoyed eating and that's all there is to life, sir, appeasing hunger.

PRENTICE. Appeasing hunger? Yes, of one kind — or another.

GITTENS. I couldn't put up with bad cooking in summer hotels, sir. No, I couldn't do it. They feed you pretty well, do they, in the big houses?

PRENTICE. Too much fuss. Such establishments are a great responsibility.

GITTENS. You escape by not being married, sir.

PRENTICE. If I were married I wouldn't have anything but a simple cottage.

GITTENS. Can you find a wife satisfied with that these days, sir? From what I hear at the Club — I mean sir, the married men can't help — I mean, most of them do what their wives want.

PRENTICE. Not *all* the wives are like that. One or two of them are suffering from husbands — unworthy of them.

GITTENS. Maybe. You can't tell where the blame belongs. Every time a Club member dies and they take his strong box out of the files to destroy his letters, with no living man's eyes allowed to read them, I always feel they're destroying what was the real heart of him.

PRENTICE. Maybe so. Maybe not — some men have secrets that are only — silly. [*A buzzer rings at the telephone near them.*]

GITTENS [*takes up receiver*]. Hello? Yes? The office says it's for you, sir. [*Hands receiver to Prentice.*]

PRENTICE. Yes? Oh. [*Starts and then says evenly.*] How are you? Where are you? You? When? Why? [*Is annoyed by Gitten's presence.*] Oh, Gittens, get me some White Rock, will you?

GITTENS. Yes sir. [*Exit down left.*]

PRENTICE [*waits for Gittens to disappear*]. I expected a note. I was coming tonight. What made him change his mind? Where is he now? But I must see you. Get a taxi, pick me up at the east entrance of the Park. Find an excuse. I can't give up the evening when I've looked forward to — Hyacinth! Listen to me! How about lunch tomorrow? The same place? But tonight! You torture me! Don't ring off! Hyacinth! [*The connection is evidently broken at the other end. He replaces the receiver slowly, reluctantly, despairingly.*] Ah! [*It is an exclamation of great disappointment.*]

WHITMARSH [*enters from up back, right, to cross to go out down right. He is middle aged, grey haired, a burden carrier, successful enough to accept responsibility without grumbling, not successful enough to have time to quibble*]. Hello, Prentice, have a good week-end?

PRENTICE. No, how about you?

WHITMARSH. The usual hot trip up and back. Took the five A.M. into town this morning. Scorching day!

PRENTICE [*walks to window*]. We're in for a blistering week.

WHITMARSH [*turns back*]. By the way, my wife's giving a house-party for our daughters this coming week. Can you go up with me?

PRENTICE. Sorry, I'm booked.

WHITMARSH. One has to tag you popular young men a winter in advance.

PRENTICE. Not quite.

WHITMARSH. That reminds me, I'd better telephone before I forget it. [*Goes to phone and after consulting a pocket note-book calls.*] Circle 2831 — 2831.

[*Gittens returns from down left with a tray, chipped ice, White Rock, and two glasses which he places upon the centre table for Prentice.*]

WHITMARSH [*at phone*]. That you, Mr. Hutchinson? Whitmarsh speaking. My wife asked me to phone you. We're giving a house-party for our girls; she said she had you on the list — what? Oh, you're going to a wedding? That's too bad. No, it isn't? Why? Oh, it's your *own* wedding! That's a sudden decision, isn't it? Congratulations! What? You *may* be free in *ten* years? Maybe, but that doesn't help me now, old chap! [*Rings off with a laugh and starts out down right.*]

PRENTICE. Oh, Whitmarsh.

WHITMARSH [*turns*]. Yes?

PRENTICE. High-ball?

WHITMARSH. Thanks, I'll come back. [*Exit down right.*]

GITTENS. An extra glass, sir? I know you always share.

PRENTICE. Bring more bottles and glasses. There's gin in my locker; no, here's my key, there's a bottle in

my room. In heat like this, one might as well drown in drink! [*He is trying to overcome his disappointment.*]

GITTENS [*takes the key*]. Yes sir. [*Exit down right.*]

PRENTICE [*stands at the table a moment in mental anguish, then draws a silver flask from a hip pocket and pours whisky into a glass. As he is doing so Glenn Sherman enters. At sight of him Prentice remains with the flask suspended over his glass*]. Glenn!

SHERMAN [*enters from down left carrying a bottle of whisky covered with dust. He has a dissipated, irritated, almost unkempt appearance. He places the bottle upon the table*]. I have been waiting for *you.*

PRENTICE [*gives a quick, searching glance, but says casually*]. I thought you were leaving for Chicago today.

SHERMAN. That's why I came to see you.

PRENTICE. Why?

SHERMAN. The reason why I didn't go.

[*Prentice dodges an answer by pouring whisky from the flask into a glass for Sherman then fills it with White Rock.*]

SHERMAN. There's an important conference on in Chicago. Although it involves a big deal in my Florida holdings, I didn't leave.

PRENTICE. So I see.

SHERMAN. I've gone to pieces!

PRENTICE. Why?

SHERMAN. It's — Hyacinth.

PRENTICE [*waits a moment for control, then answers casually*]. What's the matter with her?

SHERMAN. I don't know how to tell you. I came here to tell you. Now that I'm here, I don't know how to say it.

PRENTICE [*with concealed anxiety*]. You don't look like yourself, Glenn. Have you been dragging bottles out of your locker all day? You'd better not have any more. [*Reaches over to take his glass away.*]

SHERMAN. Oh, I'm all right. [*Holds on to the glass.*] I need it. [*Drinks.*] I wish I were *under* with no mind left. But these thoughts! These thoughts! They're driving me mad!

PRENTICE. Put on the brakes! You may be — well, you have an abominable temper and irritable nerves! What can I do for you?

SHERMAN [*with clenched fists*]. Find him! Find him!

PRENTICE. Who?

SHERMAN. You're my best friend, Burt, help me find him! I've got to kill him!

PRENTICE. My dear fellow, if you're going to kill somebody I'm your best friend by *not* trying to find him.

SHERMAN. I had to come to you. You always cooled me down at college; you got me out of that horrible scrape with that clear calm mind of yours. Now, I'm seeing red — red — red!

PRENTICE [*places his hand upon Sherman's shoulder*]. You've such a muddled way. What's it all about? I know you had your ticket for the Century today and it's speeding west now without you.

SHERMAN. In my mail this morning there was a letter, an anonymous letter —

PRENTICE. Was there?

SHERMAN. It warned me about — Hyacinth — that she — that there is a man —

PRENTICE. Oh, blow yourself, Glenn! Are you going to believe a monstrous lie like that just because you have an enemy somewhere?

SHERMAN. I haven't any enemies.

PRENTICE. Quite sure? No discarded mistress of your own taking revenge?

SHERMAN. That's too straight talk!

PRENTICE. You don't *think* straight, Glenn. You go off on wild emotional orgies of sentimentality, outraged egotism. You don't take a situation and examine it from all angles. The truth is that if Hyacinth has a lover it serves you jolly well right.

SHERMAN. That's rotten of you!

PRENTICE. Maybe she's tired waiting for you. You might give her the privilege of at least one, after you've had — Oh, I don't presume to keep track of all those *you* have amused yourself with these past years! Judging her from *your* standards, a little adventure on her part wouldn't much matter.

SHERMAN. You're too damned analytical! *You* aren't even capable of a *real* emotion. No wonder you haven't married. You can't have any understanding of how I feel! My head whirls!

PRENTICE. Did you tell her about the letter?

SHERMAN. She looked at me with those maddening lavender-blue eyes and told me she wanted nothing better than a lover.

PRENTICE. Did she?

SHERMAN. She said the only thing that worried her about the letter was that she didn't have one, and that she would have if attractive men were not so scarce!

PRENTICE. She was teasing you, Glenn. What did you say to that?

SHERMAN. I choked her.

PRENTICE. *What!* [*His hands clench the back of his chair.*]

SHERMAN. I put my hands about her throat and —

PRENTICE. My God — Glenn —

SHERMAN. Then her necklace broke; her pearls went plopping all over the floor. We had to crawl all over the floor to get them, and then she began to laugh —

PRENTICE. Laugh!

SHERMAN. It wasn't funny to me but she said it was just the *correct* time for the chain to break. She's never forgotten *why* I gave her those pearls.

PRENTICE. You wanted to be forgiven and taken back after —

SHERMAN. She said she was laughing because she didn't have any more *tears*. She said her tears had frozen into pearls. I went up to her then and close like that, there's always a faint fragrance about Hyacinth —

PRENTICE. Like the fresh promises of Spring —

SHERMAN [*passionately*]. Why did they give her that exasperating name? It just draws you and draws you to her — I — wanted to beat her but I crushed her into my arms instead.

[*Prentice turns away.*]

SHERMAN. But that letter!

PRENTICE. So you've made up in spite of it?

SHERMAN. She resisted. There *is* someone else. She doesn't love me any more.

PRENTICE. You are quite sure of that?

SHERMAN. Oh, that's sure enough. She has a lover and I've got to kill him!

WHITMARSH [*enters from down right, followed by Gittens with a bottle of gin*]. Now, Prentice, I'll accept your invitation with thanks.

PRENTICE. Mr. Whitmarsh, Mr. Sherman.

WHITMARSH. How do you do.

SHERMAN. Do.

PRENTICE [*pouring from his flask*]. Say when.

SHERMAN. Open my bottle, Gittens.

GITTENS. Yes sir.

WHITMARSH. And bring me some cigars, Gittens.

PRENTICE [*offers cigarette case*]. Sorry, I've only cigarettes. [*Takes one himself.*]

WHITMARSH. Thanks, I prefer cigars. Gittens knows the brand.

GITTENS. Oh, yes sir. [*Opens the bottles. Exit up back right.*]

[*Prentice tries to smoke but his hand trembles. He puts the cigarette out.*]

WHITMARSH. Want another light?

PRENTICE. Changed my mind, too hot. I wonder if the window's up as far as it can go. [*Goes to the window and remains there for air.*]

WHITMARSH. We need rain. This drought is bad on crops. Creating a crazy market. All kinds of conflicting reports come in from the West. [*Waits as if to give Sherman a chance to help the conversation but as Sherman seems disinclined Whitmarsh continues trying to be friendly.*] Perhaps you don't have to watch what is happening inland. [*Waits but as no answer comes.*] Grain interests me — we make breakfast foods.

PRENTICE. Mr. Sherman's in real estate. At present he's dragging Florida out of the ocean.

WHITMARSH. Well, tell me, is Florida a good investment? It is coming back?

SHERMAN [*revives at this question automatically speeding his reply like a lesson well memorized, but his heart*

is not in it]. Florida's going to be the Riviera of this country. It doesn't have to go through the period of ugly growth we've known in small towns. It's being born beautiful. It's the rich man's playground and the poor man's opportunity. I've acreage outside of Miami, selling lots, restricted to high class residence, bound to bring legitimate profit.

Boyd [*enters from up back right, followed by Gittens, carrying his suit-case, golf bag, tennis racket, yellow slicker, motor dust coat, and a top coat. He puts these things down, brings Whitmarsh a few cigars for which Whitmarsh signs a slip. Boyd carries a basket of fishing paraphernalia, a revolver, a riding-crop, and a patent leather bag containing a wet bathing suit. He has all the accoutrements of a versatile athlete but none of the appearance*]. Bring them in here, Gittens, I want to send some downstairs to be cleaned. Good evening.

Whitmarsh. Hello, Boyd, back from a fishing trip?

Boyd. Sort of. Here's a wet bathing suit, Gittens, hang it up to dry.

Prentice [*crosses to examine the paraphernalia*]. You must have been gone a month, fishing tackle, gun, golf sticks, tennis racket, riding-crop, motor coat, slicker, where's the fish? Didn't you bring back a fish?

Boyd. No. The muskie I caught only weighed eleven pounds. You're not allowed to keep 'em under twelve. The guide had to throw it back.

Prentice [*feels wet bathing suit*]. I envy you your one last swim this morning.

Boyd. Oh, *I* didn't go into the water this morning. I was too cold. My suit was borrowed by one of those

cheeky college undergraduates who always arrive with no baggage of their own.

PRENTICE. Provider for the world, are you?

GITTENS [*takes the suit from Prentice*]. Anything else, sir? [*Exit down left.*]

BOYD. Polish the fishing tackle.

PRENTICE [*swinging a golf stick*]. How's your game?

BOYD. Oh, I didn't get time to play.

PRENTICE. There's a continent of dirt on your brassie.

BOYD. One of the girls didn't have any clubs so she borrowed mine.

PRENTICE. I don't think much of her on the golf field.

BOYD. It was all right. She had a good figure.

PRENTICE [*holds up a black tin box*]. What's this?

BOYD. A red cross first aid.

WHITMARSH. Did you expect an accident?

BOYD. You never can tell what may happen.

WHITMARSH. Have you ever used it?

BOYD. Not yet, but when the day comes and it's wanted, it will be there.

WHITMARSH. You know Mr. Sherman, Boyd?

BOYD. No. How do you do.

SHERMAN. Do.

WHITMARSH. Say Boyd, my wife's giving a house-party for our girls next week-end —

PRENTICE [*amusing himself with the revolver*]. What did you shoot?

BOYD. Targets, that is, *they* did. I don't like to shoot but you've got to walk along with the crowd.

SHERMAN [*has risen to examine the revolver held by Prentice*]. What make is it? [*Reaches for it.*]

PRENTICE. Not good enough for you, old man. [*Replaces it into the open suit-case.*]

SHERMAN [*shrugs his shoulders as he returns to his seat*]. You seem to be equipped for any occasion.

BOYD. So few are. It makes me nervous, the way people go from house to house-party without tooth brushes, collar buttons, and thread. I take extra along. Hostesses look dazed when you ask them for thread, and as to finding a needle — if there's one in the guest room, it's rusty — you just have to jump into the motor, to the village for a *needle.*

WHITMARSH. I hope our house isn't like that. I'm sure we would be grateful to you if —

BOYD. Oh, the hostesses don't know what the guest-room lacks. It's the guests whom I supply. It's very disillusioning to learn how few girls bring their own needles, very disillusioning.

SHERMAN. Are you still lucky enough to have *illusions* about women?

BOYD. I am more and more discouraged. I've spent the last five years looking for a wife but haven't found a girl yet with the qualifications.

WHITMARSH. Boyd, my wife's giving a house-party for our girls next week-end. Can you go up with me?

BOYD. I'll have to consult my book. [*Takes a small engagement book out of his pocket, looks at it, shakes his head.*] Can't. I'm scheduled for Cape May. It's to be a sailing party with crab catching and clam bakes on the beach.

WHITMARSH. You must average about three days a week in town.

PRENTICE. That's certainly giving business the cold shoulder.

BOYD. Say, that's a good one. [*Takes another little book out of another pocket and with an attached pencil makes a notation.*] Cold shoulder, summer time, keep cool in the summer by giving your business the cold shoulder. I'll use it next week. One gets so dumb-belled dry for conversation.

PRENTICE. Have a drink?

BOYD. No thanks, I've had enough water and mixtures until next week. Have a pistachio nut? [*Offers a bag which he has taken out of his top-coat pocket.*]

WHITMARSH. No, thanks.

[*Prentice and Sherman decline.*]

BOYD. I like to eat nuts because it's so much trouble to get the meat out of the shell. As I don't smoke it gives me something to do. [*Eats nuts leisurely, enjoying the work of prying them open with his nails.*]

WHITMARSH. What kind of a wife are you looking for, Boyd?

BOYD. First, there's that important question about children. I'd like a large estate and half a dozen children tumbling over the lawn. I could make a tennis champion of one and a golf shark of another, but girls don't want large families. I think we ought to do our patriotic share in saving the future from the dark races.

PRENTICE. Is that the way you propose?

BOYD. It's better to have ideas clear at the start. If something isn't done this overwhelming dark horde will vanquish our early American stock.

SHERMAN. Let the hordes overwhelm. Let them sweep along and conquer. We'll be gone by then and who cares! Life's not so much anyway!

BOYD. We ought to pass a law automatically divorcing couples who are childless after the first three years.

SHERMAN. After three years you can't trust any of them.

PRENTICE. Not a bad idea, a change after three years, gives the other fellow a chance.

WHITMARSH. You bachelors are too quick to theorize. I'm an old, married man, father of three girls and I've never yet had any reason to want to change.

PRENTICE. A man with a wife and three daughters hasn't any time to *think* about his condition. It's all he can do to manage to keep it.

WHITMARSH. Just the same, my advice is, get married.

SHERMAN. No hope for Prentice. He has a legal mind. His emotions never overstep the margin of a brief.

BOYD. Then there's that question of disease. I've read a horrible book on statistics. I liked one girl but her father was an inventor and you never know how these streaks go, whether to genius or madness.

PRENTICE. So you ask to see the family tree before you begin to court under it?

BOYD. Well, I don't want to be married for my money.

PRENTICE. Still, the girls do have to marry for *something!*

SHERMAN. They'll marry you for your golf clubs, bathing suits, and needles!

PRENTICE. No doubt, he's in terrible danger!

BOYD. I had an early lesson which taught me caution. Before I came East a girl pretended she cared, almost promised to marry me, when a fellow came along from Los Angeles she had known before. He was furious when he saw me, said he could tell me enough to make me want to leave her, and he did, and I left.

SHERMAN. Did you ask her? Did she defend herself?

BOYD. No; she looked at me with those queer lavender-blue eyes of hers, said I could believe what I pleased, and I went.

PRENTICE. She might have been deeply wounded by your lack of faith.

BOYD. I wasn't going to take any chances and be haunted by doubt the rest of my life.

WHITMARSH. What became of her?

BOYD. I didn't want to know. She had a strange first name, like the perfume of her, a sort of sweet, warm, power of drawing you — Hyacinth.

[*Prentice and Sherman rising, face Boyd, but realizing quickly the tell-tale movement try to cover.*]

PRENTICE [*laughs*]. I guess Sherman and I had the same idea. You used the word warm; you wanted a fan, didn't you, Glenn? [*Takes two fans from neighboring chairs, gives one to Glenn, keeping one for himself.*]

SHERMAN [*taking fan sinks into his chair*]. That's an unusual name.

BOYD. She lived up to it, wore hyacinth-blue gowns, you know that queer blue.

SHERMAN. And the color of her hair?

BOYD. Very pale; her skin was fair like the palest of wax pink hyacinths.

SHERMAN. And you thought her cold?

BOYD. Cool and remote — didn't go after men — sat very still, somehow *drew* you to her.

SHERMAN. A maddening reserve, fake purity, false to the core!

PRENTICE [*controlling himself with difficulty*]. You're *both* wrong!

BOYD. Do you know her?

PRENTICE. No more than Sherman, but Sherman and you expect all women to measure into your preconceived ideas. You cannot stretch your minds to understand a

type like Hyacinth, pardon the use of her name, you gave no other, and women like Hyacinth are so conscious of your minds which cannot understand, that they consider it too much trouble to enlighten you. They withdraw behind a mask to let you think what you please.

SHERMAN. It's damned unpleasant!

BOYD. I don't want to deal with a mask. Cards on the table must face up.

PRENTICE. What *you* want is no game at all.

BOYD. I am no gambler in women. They must be beyond reproach.

PRENTICE. And what have both of you done to raise yourselves to so lofty a pedestal in your demands? [*Gets up.*] Are you both beyond reproach? Don't ask me to believe it.

SHERMAN. Oh, Prentice, stop your court haranguing.

PRENTICE. You don't think. You don't really *think!* [*Turns to Boyd.*] Why should you seek to know the *extent* of indiscretions as judged from our very imperfect human knowledge? You can't measure souls with earthly yardsticks.

BOYD. But you can't be in doubt! A woman's most important qualification is her virtue.

PRENTICE. Is it? I have met women whose grasping selfishness, disloyal tongues, dishonest minds have been redeemed only, and in *them* even that seemed negligible, by their technically physical virtue.

BOYD. But she didn't deny the accusations.

PRENTICE. Her innocence could afford to seem guilty in her outraged disgust at your accusations. [*To Boyd.*] What drove you away was not the belief in her faithlessness but the fear of an outrage to your vanity.

[*To Sherman.*] A man may have ceased to love a woman but his vanity is stung if he thinks that she too, has found someone else. It is your vanity that howls for surety, don't label it love.

SHERMAN. Sit down!

PRENTICE. No, I want to say this. It's been choking me a long time. The practice of law gives a depressing insight into the frustration of lives. The hunger that governs us must find food. Meat and drink we acknowledge; body for body we acknowledge, but that deeper hunger of the spirit, we frustrate it at every turn. The secrets of souls might not seem as bad as you imagine if you understood.

BOYD. I don't know whether he belongs in the pulpit or in jail.

PRENTICE. You don't understand a word I am saying because you are still slumbering in your senses. Hyacinth is spiritually so far advanced that for either of you to question her motives or her actions is an impertinence!

BOYD [*jumps to his feet*]. An impertinence! You accuse *me!* Why! I was generous giving her even a chance to explain! Another man would have left without giving her a chance! She did not deny because she could not. What the Los Angeles man said was true. And he said *he* had not been the first!

SHERMAN. Take back that lie! Take back that damn lie! [*He seizes the revolver out of the open suit-case and aims it, touching the flesh of Boyd's throat. Prentice springs forward, Whitmarsh rises.*]

PRENTICE. Glenn! Glenn!

SHERMAN. Take back that damned lie! [*As Boyd with the revolver on his throat is incapable of either denial or acquiescence, Sherman pulls the trigger. It clicks but the magazine is empty.*]

WHITMARSH [*relieved*]. Empty.

[*Sherman lets the revolver fall.*]

BOYD [*surprised to find himself still alive*]. Th-th-th-they must have used up all my cartridges too.

[*Sherman staggering back in realization of the length to which his impulse might have taken him, sinks into a chair.*]

PRENTICE. Leave him to me. He's been drinking.

WHITMARSH. I don't understand — what did Boyd say —

PRENTICE. Must be the heat. I'm better off with him alone.

WHITMARSH. If you want me, phone. My room's 831.

[*Crosses to help Boyd struggling to collect his paraphernalia.*] I'll help you with those, Boyd. [*Exeunt with Boyd down right.*]

PRENTICE. Now Glenn, you've aimed a gun at one man tonight and I hope you have exhausted your desire. In your case it is no longer a question if there is a lover

for a husband to kill, it is a question as to whether or not the wife expects to *keep* the husband.

SHERMAN. I didn't know what I was doing but you heard what he said; before I married her, she's tricked me all these years.

PRENTICE. Your affair with Ruby three years ago put some bills and letters into Hyacinth's hands which she has been loath to use against you, and I, too, have advised keeping out of hideous publicity.

SHERMAN. Oh, she has made *you* her confident!

PRENTICE. These rages you go into will be dangerous for Hyacinth. Crawford and Compton have ample records against you in their files, you won't contest a divorce, will you?

SHERMAN. I won't clear out to give her an open door for marriage with her lover.

PRENTICE. Then we'll have to force it upon you, Glenn, because —

SHERMAN. You! You?

PRENTICE. We have been, technically, true to you, if knowing that is any satisfaction to your demand for accuracy, but mentally, we have been traitors. We could no more deny the inspiration we are to each other than command the earth to repel the sun. You have proved tonight that your claim to her is less than mine. I know nothing about the Los Angeles affair; it may be true. What Hyacinth is today is the sum of what Hyacinth has been all her life, and I ask for no-one more perfect.

SHERMAN. A thief! My best friend!

PRENTICE. I only treasure what you took no trouble to keep. [*Rings bell.*]

SHERMAN. It's a hell of a mess!

PRENTICE. No, we've ploughed through to a new clear road.

GITTENS [*enters from down left*]. Yes sir?

PRENTICE. Show Mr. Sherman to a room, he has decided to spend the night at the club.

SHERMAN. No! I'm going home! [*Exit back centre.*]

GITTENS. Will you have a taxi, sir? [*Follows him out.*]

PRENTICE [*dashes to the telephone*]. Circle 2782 — hurry please. Circle 2782. Ring again, they must answer. Ring insistently. Hello? Hyacinth? Glenn knows. He has just left the club. He is in a dangerous mood. You are not safe if he finds you there. Go to the hotel next door at once, don't wait to pack. At once! Call me back from the hotel, at *once!* [*Hangs up receiver and paces the floor.*]

GITTENS [*enters from back left and stops to shuffle his foot over the floor where Boyd's baggage stood*]. Mr. Boyd brought some of the mountains back with him.

PRENTICE. Gittens, you're a witness I am staying at the club tonight, *all* night!

GITTENS. Yes sir.

PRENTICE. Gittens, when I'm dead and they open my file box to burn the letters I have there — there will be faint perfume with the smoke. What a pity that letters like that can escape into the light only as essence. And yet — the secrets — are more precious because unshared by a glaring world! I'm raving, Gittens.

GITTENS. Yes sir.

PRENTICE. When secrets make you very happy they can't be bad ones, can they?

GITTENS. Well, sir, a *happy* person never has done me any harm. It's the unhappy, cross people that breed trouble. [*Exit back right. The telephone buzzes.*]

PRENTICE [*leaps to it*]. Prentice speaking. Yes — yes. [*Relieved.*] Oh, you're safe. At the hotel? It is matter for your lawyers now. I'll meet you in their office in the morning and tell you what happened. It is the beginning of our happiness, Hyacinth — what dear? Are you *crying?* — Oh, my dear, I'm glad you're crying — Yes dear, some day the world will understand.

CURTAIN

THE PUPPETEER

A ONE–ACT PLAY FOR TWO CHARACTERS

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BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Original production at the Romany Club, Chicago, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

THE GRANDMOTHER.....*Ella L. Cummings*
THE GRANDSON.....*Crosby Hodgman*

SCENE: A decorative staircase.

Can be played on the staircase in a house if the lower hall and adjoining rooms give ample space for the audience.

The GRANDMOTHER, about eighty years old, in her appearance and manner reflects a past of imperious domination and personal vanity, almost justified because of the skill of her conscious fascination.

The GRANDSON, about twenty-five, is handsome in a delicate way. His manners are courteous, his mind yields in deference to age but suppression of his own individuality is wearing it down to the breaking point.

THE PUPPETEER

The grandson runs stealthily down the stairs carrying a suitcase, hat, and overcoat, and tip-toes to the front door as if trying to make an escape.

GRANDMOTHER [*calls from upstairs*]. Walter.

[*Walter halts, irresolute.*]

GRANDMOTHER. Walter!

[*Walter takes a step forward, retreats, regains determination, goes hastily to the door.*]

GRANDMOTHER [*imperiously*]. Walter!

WALTER [*conceals the suitcase, hat, and coat, and returns to the staircase*]. Yes, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. Where are you?

WALTER. Down here in the hall.

GRANDMOTHER. Come, help me walk down the stairs.

WALTER. Yes, grandmother. [*Makes certain that the suitcase is concealed.*]

GRANDMOTHER. Well, well, must I wait all day?

WALTER. I'm coming.

GRANDMOTHER. What are you doing?

WALTER [*reluctantly going up the stairs*]. Oh, nothing.

GRANDMOTHER. Nothing! Quite right! You do nothing. Here, give me your arm. At least you can be gentleman enough for that. I didn't use to have to beg for a gentleman's arm. They were quick enough in my young days. [*Appears at the head of the stairs leaning on a cane.*]

WALTER. My arm always has been at your service, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER [*taking his arm, begins a painful walk down the stairs, stopping to rest every few steps*]. Humph! When I demand it.

WALTER. Do you think you ought to attempt the stairs, grandmother?

GRANDMOTHER Three months in bed is enough.

WALTER. Yes, it has been a long time.

GRANDMOTHER. Long for *you*, you mean. Because my accident kept you here. Well, it was Providence showing you your life belongs here — with me. [*Takes a painful step down.*]

WALTER. Does it hurt?

GRANDMOTHER. Well, I have had eighty years of worse pain than that.

WALTER. You're very courageous. The doctor said —

GRANDMOTHER. Don't quote the doctor to me. I've never had one that knew anything and I'll outlive them all yet.

WALTER. You have outlived 'most everyone, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. Fools they were to die so young.

WALTER. Sometimes I feel as if I were dying too; maybe you'll bury the last of the race yet, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. Nonsense, you're only twenty-five.

WALTER. You don't wish to understand me, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. Don't wish to! What *do* I understand? You don't want to live here. You don't want to live in this house where I was married, where your father was born, where you were born.

WALTER. Where I was born, that's just it. You never should have allowed me to be born here. My mother had a right to a home of her own.

GRANDMOTHER. Your father couldn't afford it.

WALTER. Yes he could, a little one, even a flat.

GRANDMOTHER. Do you think I could let my son live in a neighborhood or be housed in a manner unsuited to his name?

WALTER. Yes, we have sacrified everything, always, for our name. You could have let him have his freedom, given him an allowance. Grandfather was willing to.

GRANDMOTHER. Your grandfather agreed with me.

WALTER. Grandfather always had to in the end. He didn't dare do otherwise.

GRANDMOTHER. Walter! Your manners!

WALTER. I beg your pardon, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. You are very irritable of late.

WALTER. I am not feeling well.

GRANDMOTHER. Perhaps I have kept you up too long at nights reading to me, but when nurses insist upon their sleep and become so high and mighty what can I do? I must have someone help me through my insomnia!

WALTER. Don't you ever sleep at all, grandmother?

GRANDMOTHER. I've scarcely slept an hour all my life.

WALTER. How have you managed to stay so strong?

GRANDMOTHER. Will power! Will power, the will!

WALTER. Yes, you've always had your way.

GRANDMOTHER. Others could have had theirs.

WALTER. No-one had the courage to disagree with you!

GRANDMOTHER. Am I then only capable of inspiring fear?

WALTER. Devotion, too, grandmother. You have a fascination that sucks the very blood from other people.

GRANDMOTHER. My gallant grandson, you speak like a lover I once had.

WALTER. Not grandfather?

GRANDMOTHER [*leans reminiscently upon the banister*]. Do you think your grandfather was the only man who wanted to marry me?

WALTER. Oh, no, there must have been many.

GRANDMOTHER. I led them a dance, I tell you. Poor fools, they're all dead.

WALTER. Did they marry?

GRANDMOTHER. Oh, yes, women of putty, but they never could forget *me.* I flirted with them and when they lost their heads I banished them.

WALTER. That was cruelty, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. Some people *remember* only cruelty.

WALTER. Well, I call our family a huge failure.

GRANDMOTHER. Whether it is to be a failure or not, depends upon you. You must marry Lillian Huntly and continue our line.

WALTER. I can't love her, grandmother. I can't marry until I've — I don't know how to say it — found myself — worked or accomplished something myself — if you hadn't had the accident I'd be half way round the world and learning to — to — well —, learning to be *grown up!*

GRANDMOTHER. You have learned the danger of leaving me. I might have another accident. You have to be here to manage my funeral. [*Stops with a twinge of pain.*]

WALTER. Shall I carry you?

GRANDMOTHER. Pooh, you're not strong enough for that! I'm sure the maids have not been dusting in the corners. I'd like to catch them when they don't expect me.

WALTER. They're doing their best. It has been very comfortable with you upstairs.

GRANDMOTHER. Oh, you *liked* my absence. Well, I'm back now to take my place at the head of the table. [*Glances at hall above.*] Oh, nurse, see how far I've gone. I'll be ready to discharge you in a day or two.

WALTER [*with double meaning*]. Nurse, grandmother's teasing you. She'll need you much longer than that.

GRANDMOTHER. Ssh! Nurses are expensive, too expensive when they read my books and listen to my radio. I don't like them puttering about. They annoy me.

WALTER. But you'll be lonely.

GRANDMOTHER. Not while I have you.

WALTER [*quietly as they reach the landing and wait to rest a while*]. But grandmother, you are not going to have me because now that you are well again I am going away.

GRANDMOTHER [*grasps banister with emotional intensity*]. Walter, I have had enough of these arguments. I forbid you to go. My word is absolute!

WALTER [*steeling himself to courageous resistance*]. Yes, grandmother, so it has been. You have crushed two generations but you are not going to crush *me*. In her last illness mother implored me to escape. She showed me how your power had been your jealousy masked, how you have played with every one of us and made us your puppets on strings!

GRANDMOTHER [*sharply*]. Her mind was weakening —

WALTER. No, clarifying. While she lay there for hours alone she could think clearly but before that, you

had kept her mind in such haphazard state you continually confused her.

GRANDMOTHER [*with a laugh*]. If that doesn't confess a weak mind —

WALTER. I know what she meant, but it is not easy to —

GRANDMOTHER. You are all weak minded, that's the truth! Your sister proved it! She died insane.

WALTER [*goaded*]. Ann's death was a psychic murder! *Your* murder!

GRANDMOTHER [*pounds her hand angrily upon the banister*]. You accuse me! Are you quite mad yourself?

WALTER. I can't help it, it's as if they were talking through me!

GRANDMOTHER. Who?

WALTER. The dead. They want me to leave you. They are pushing me. [*Looks askance with a contraction of his shoulders.*] They say it doesn't matter if you are left alone. I've got to escape from you or else you'll crush me too. I know you will. I've been feeling it for years. [*Grows hysterical.*] I can't live like this!

GRANDMOTHER [*is enraged but she controls herself and looks guardedly toward upper and lower halls for fear his voice has carried indiscreetly*]. An Edgerton does not shriek aloud and give information for vulgar ears.

WALTER [*lowers his voice but continues with reproach more in the manner of a child than a man used to pro-*

claiming his own convictions]. You made a business man out of my father and you crushed the artist in him.

GRANDMOTHER [*grimly*]. Real artists don't allow themselves to be crushed.

WALTER. You made an invalid of my mother because you kept her under your roof, watched, criticized, interfered. Even in her relations to her husband he always first had to be your son. Both of them molding themselves to your will. My father had no resistance. You'd bred that out of him.

GRANDMOTHER [*stamps her cane*]. Have you gone mad like your sister to wrangle with an old woman just out of bed? Shall I call the servants to protect me? Shall I call the lawyers to disinherit you?

WALTER My sister's mind *was* sound. It was the evil slander of the man she loved, your sly and underhanded intriguing which sent him away. Ann was the weakest tool you had to play with. Oh, [*puts his hands across his eyes*] I can't forget the wild, hunted look that came into her eyes. I've got to leave you before you conquer *me!*

GRANDMOTHER [*begins to whimper*]. You are so unkind to me. My ankle pains me and I am tottering with age. You poison your words with jealousy because you think your allowance should be larger.

WALTER. It never has been small enough to force me to earn any and never large enough to let me accomplish much. You've held the purse strings for all of us for half a century!

GRANDMOTHER. You are cruel to me. I am very weak. I am ready to faint with exhaustion. Come, let us have

our tea. I'm so lonely, Walter. Nobody drops in any more. Carrie used to have the silver urn ready every afternoon and we couldn't count the callers. [*Calls off.*] Theresa! [*If the stairs are few she limps across the stage during the foregoing scene, making her way toward the dining-room.*] Tea for us, and bring my grandson thin buttered bread the way he likes it.

WALTER [*half to himself*]. They are telling me their sacrifice was only feeding your selfishness —

GRANDMOTHER. And, Theresa, the guava jelly Mr. Walter likes so well —

WALTER. One has the right to one's own —

GRANDMOTHER. Theresa, and some of the old cognac too for his tea. Walter, to please an old sick woman who hasn't much longer to live [*puts her arm upon his with gentle scheming to be magnetic*] don't talk any more about leaving me.

WALTER. If I wait another moment it will be too late.

GRANDMOTHER [*with vampish arms about him*]. But I love you Walter. All my interests are centred in you. You are the last of our family and I *live* only *through* you.

WALTER. I feel strength oozing from me like sap from a tree.

GRANDMOTHER. You are hungry. You want guava jelly, fragrant tea, the smoke of a cigarette, all the comforts of warm shelter. Walter, don't speak again of leaving me. I couldn't bear the emptiness of this house. It would be my tomb.

WALTER [*draws away with an effort*]. Can you walk alone with your cane?

GRANDMOTHER [*suspiciously*]. Why?

WALTER. I — I left my eye-glasses upstairs.

GRANDMOTHER. Well, hurry, get them.

WALTER. Shall I call Theresa?

GRANDMOTHER. I can manage.

WALTER [*leaving her at the door of the dining-room in the hall below*]. I'm glad, grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER. Hurry back, I don't want you out of my sight even for a moment. Walter, my dear, you are an exquisite comfort to me.

WALTER. I — I've tried to do what was right — You're sure you *can* walk alone?

GRANDMOTHER. Theresa, come help me. And Theresa, the tea must be hot. Mr. Walter likes it hot. Yesterday it was not perfect. [*Imperiously.*] I expect it perfect today. [*Disappears.*]

[*Walter stands irresolute, then hurries to take suitcase, hat, and coat; hesitates; tiptoes to the front door and slams it behind him.*]

GRANDMOTHER [*off stage, calls*]. Walter.

[*There is no answer.*]

GRANDMOTHER. Walter! Walter!!

[*The silence mocks her.*]

CURTAIN

LATCHKEYS

A STAIRCASE PLAY IN ONE ACT

COPYRIGHT 1925
BY ALICE GERSTENBERG

Originally produced on the staircase of Miss Gerstenberg's home in Chicago but was soon repeated in a lengthened and revised one-hour version at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. William H. Scriven, under the direction of Mrs. Elliot Jenkins, with the following cast:

CHARACTERS

HORACE PENDLETON.....*Samuel P. Newton*
CORA, *his wife*.....*Helen Gilbert*
HAROLD, *their son*.....*Pierre Brosseau*
ADRIENNE, *their daughter*.....*Florence Harris*
TITIA, *their daughter*.....*Helen Walton*
LAWRENCE BRADLEY.....*Hempstead Washburne*
DANE NORTON.....*Loring Coleman*
JANE, *a maid*.....*Doris Russell Barnitz*
GUSTA, *a maid*.....*Mary Washburne*
THOMAS, *a butler*.....*Gerald A. Frank*
BURGLAR and POLICEMAN.....*Edward H. Pasmore*

The play has had many other successful productions, notably by The Gardner School in New York City.

Although there is now a three-act version of this play for stage production this one-act version was first written to be played on staircases in homes.

The author's wide experience in the presentation of plays with professionals and amateurs, on the professional stage with its expense of scenery and stage crew, and in Little Theatres, clubs, houses, with their limitations of space and budget, encouraged her to evolve a plot that could be played without a curtain and on any staircase in a home where the hall allows seating capacity for an audience.

In a home the play seems to rise out of the audience itself, no curtain separating the players, the beginning and the ends of acts indicated by the ringing of a gong to represent the hours of a clock.

As the architecture of staircases varies no very definite directions are possible for entrances and exits and these are called "front entrance," "kitchen entrance," "adjoining room" to be labelled left or right by the director in charge of the performance.

LATCHKEYS

A clock strikes eleven. Thomas, the butler, enters from an adjoining room, makes a few gestures suggesting he has been straightening the house for the night, takes newspapers from a table and sits down on the stairs to read. As a performance of the play must conform to the architecture of the house in which it is given, the following directions are suggestive rather than accurate. When played in a house the separation of players and audience is not stressed as the aim is to make the audience feel itself part of the plot.

Gusta, a saucy and comic-faced Swedish maid, in fashionable service uniform but none too neat, appears at the head of the stairs folding a brilliant bed-spread.

GUSTA. Thomas! Thomas! Vy you schtop de radio?

THOMAS. You and Jane said you were going upstairs to turn down the beds.

GUSTA. Ve can hear if you amplivy.

THOMAS. Oh, we've had enough of it. I've locked up from basement to attic, pulled down the shades [*glances at wrist-watch*] and I've only half an hour to read the evening papers before Mr. and Mrs. Pendleton will be returning from the opera.

GUSTA [*hangs the spread over the banister and comes all the way down the stairs*]. Vy should dey haf all de jewels and de goings out to parties evry night.

JANE [*a demure maid in fashionable uniform, appears at the head of the stairs carrying a brilliant bed-spread*

of another color]. Gusta, where's the bed-spread for madam's room?

[*Thomas exits into the adjoining room.*]

GUSTA [*looks after Thomas and poses against the newel post*]. Thomas, he very up in de head.

JANE. Oh, Gusta, Tom is an artist.

GUSTA. You bode too nice to de pig Pendletons.

JANE. Look out! You're spilling madam's lemon juice!

GUSTA. Aw, let it schpill! Notin' ain't goin' to make her t'in anyway.

JANE. Don't you think it helps?

GUSTA. Helps? Dis t'imbleful? Ven she eats like she does?

JANE. I don't know. I don't watch madam eat.

GUSTA. No, you don't haf to schtand vid Thomas in de dining-room, vatchin' 'em put grub into der mouz. How I hates to see 'em eat.

JANE. Why? You eat, I eat, we all eat.

GUSTA. Vy should I be passin' 'em tings? Vy vasn't I born in Miss Adrienne's place and vy isn't she servin' *me?* Vy must you —

JANE. I'm kinda glad to have the place. It keeps me out of the rain.

GUSTA. You show it too much. You clean too well. [*Goes up the stairs.*]

[*Thomas enters.*]

JANE. Gusta has such a crooked way of thinking! She's got a hammer for the people who pay her. But I like the Pendletons, at least, I'm sorry for them and specially for Mr. Pendleton. He doesn't seem to be happy with all his money and he always looks worried. I've got a soft spot for him.

THOMAS [*joining her on the stairs*]. I feel sorry for *ourselves*. Why don't we get married?

JANE. This is such a beautiful house. They might give us the little suite next to the ballroom way upstairs. The light's good from the north there. If they'd let us park here I could sneak doing some of your work and let you have time to paint. If we went away I'd miss seeing the tree of jade and cornelian, and the rose quartz Buddha. I imagine they're mine when I dust them.

THOMAS. Yes, and the etchings in the library and the Innes in the drawing-room. We'd miss 'em.

JANE. And we're warm here. If we had our own flat we'd have jazzing gas bills, groceries, and rent!

THOMAS. Living here has made me soft.

GUSTA [*comes down the stairs carrying a waste-basket filled with rubbish. Her progress is one of uninterrupted direction and chatter*]. Dat Harold mak me so mad! Dis mornin' I clean out his vaste basket. He dress to go out tonight and he tear paper into pieces and he trow cigarette ash all over. He vone bad boy.

THOMAS. But all the girls want to marry him. It's his looks and because he's a Pendleton.

GUSTA [*pushes herself between Tom and Jane as they sit reading the paper*]. Vat's news? Oh, you read Art Exhibitions! Give me de triller! [*Tries to extract a sheet.*]

THOMAS. Don't rumple it or they'll know it's been read.

GUSTA [*tries to secure a sheet of the paper but Jane pulls out half of it for herself leaving the other half in Thomas's hands. Gusta has to be content with reading the outside pages of the sections Thomas and Jane are hidden behind*]. "Beats vife vid milk bottle. Hides her copse in basement under coal bin." Dat's a fine vay to treat a vife!

JANE [*from behind her newspaper*]. Oh, Gusta, *can* that cheap stuff!

GUSTA [*looking cross-eyed*]. Vy so? Vone must look lif straight in de face!

THOMAS [*to Jane*]. There's a new American Exhibit at the Institute. We'll go there Sunday.

GUSTA [*nudges Jane*]. Oh, he's nutty again! Say Thomas, [*she glances at the back of Thomas's paper*] here's a man dat made himsel a millionaire. Oh, dey all got more money den dey ought to have and dey don't care anyting 'bout us. Ve don't mean notin' to 'em. None of dem say good morning. Mr. Pendleton ever say "good morning" to you, Thomas?

THOMAS [*behind his paper*]. He's too anxious to hurry to the office.

GUSTA. Las' summer I vas in de house here alone vid him. Mrs. Pendleton and de oders ver in Europe. Dey leaf him here to make money.

JANE [*yawns*]. Did you stay here all alone?

GUSTA [*rises*]. Vel, I vas scared all time. Mrs. Pendleton, she haf all de drapes in covers and all de chairs in covers like vite sheets. I tink ghosts all over, everything creak and mak noise. I schtay couse I vas newcomer, but no more. Dey go avay and dey leaf him only his bedroom. He come home to schleep, he eat in restaurant and at club.

JANE. Oh, I feel sorry for Mr. Pendleton.

GUSTA. I don't. Pig Pendleton, ve do his vork and he pay machine-like but he does not vorry dat ve aren't happy, and I vant to be happy! [*She sits down again.*]

THOMAS [*rises immediately, tossing the paper aside*]. I'm going to bed! [*Jane neatly folds the papers and puts them upon the table.*]

JANE [*waits for Thomas to come up*]. Did you lock up?

THOMAS. Sure. Good-night, Jane.

[*Gusta tosses her head and follows. They disappear as the clock strikes twelve.*]

[*Burglar wearing a mask and holding a revolver enters by using a key which gives him entrance through the front door. He roves stealthily about the hall, glances about cautiously and conceals himself behind a curtain or screen when an outer door slams. Then one hears the jingling of keys at the entrance door as Mr. Pendleton, a middle-aged business man of vigor and ability opens it for Mrs. Pendleton.*]

MRS. PENDLETON [*is stout and overladen with opera apparel and jewels. She enters in grand manner*]. Why does it always take you so long to open the door? [*Sneezes.*] I get thoroughly chilled waiting for you to find the key. [*Turns on the lights.*]

PENDLETON [*slams the door shut*]. After this, you'd better have Thomas sit up for us.

MRS. PENDLETON. And pay him higher wages? That is a luxury *we* can't afford. But the Leatherbees! *They* can have three men servants and *she* has a personal maid. I have to skimp along with that awful Gusta and that green Jane!

PENDLETON. Well, six servants ought to be enough for us.

MRS. PENDLETON. There you are again, with no ambition, no striving for expansion —

PENDLETON. *Expansion!* I thought you were trying to get *thin!*

MRS. PENDLETON. That's another matter, Horace, I've got to check you up on.

PENDLETON. What's that?

MRS. PENDLETON. Alluding to my size. Must you always have it on your mind? I'm doing the best I can to get rid of it.

PENDLETON. I know it. I pay one thousand dollars a year for your massage.

MRS. PENDLETON. Not all for me. That includes facials for Adrienne and Titia. No appreciation from you for your *beautiful* daughters!

PENDLETON. Well, it's five years since Adrienne's début and three years since Titia's. [*Wearily takes off his muffler and coat and hangs them in a closet if there is one, saying many of the lines in the closet.*] I don't see that their beauty *gets* them anywhere.

MRS. PENDLETON. Gets them anywhere? Have they one free, dull evening at home? [*Gives him no chance to answer.*] Not *one!*

PENDLETON. I'm sure they haven't. I haven't seen them for weeks, only once in a while in the morning, on the stairs when they are coming up and I am going down.

MRS. PENDLETON. You ought to be proud of the *three lovely* women in your household and of your popular, handsome son!

PENDLETON. Handsome son! That's all you can say for him!

MRS. PENDLETON. It makes me so unhappy, the way you treat dear Harold.

PENDLETON. Never earned a nickel.

MRS. PENDLETON. He doesn't have to. He's so *popular!*

PENDLETON. He's so *pickled!* [*Turns on Mrs. Pendleton.*] I had ambitions for him but you cut in with all this folderol of society and —

MRS. PENDLETON [*gives a short comic sneeze like a cat*]. Why didn't you stop him earlier yourself? [*Starts up the stairs.*]

PENDLETON. As if I had the time! When I have the business pressure it does seem as if you could do your share.

MRS. PENDLETON [*stops on the stairs*]. Do my share? As if I'm not *overworked* already! [*Pauses.*] Keeping our position.

PENDELTON [*paces up and down*]. But nothing happens. Same dinners, same people, same talk. You're always chasing something and I never can see what it is you're chasing. It gives you nervous prostration and —

MRS. PENDLETON. Well, I *have* to look after Adrienne and Titia.

PENDLETON. Look after them? Yes, where are they *now?*

MRS. PENDLETON. Where are they now? At the Montgomery ball, I think, or *was* it the Martins?

PENDLETON. You're not sure. You let them run wild!

MRS. PENDLETON [*leaning over the banister*]. But what do *you* want, Horace? What else is there?

PENDLETON [*wistfully*]. If we could get the girls married off, maybe we could —

MRS. PENDLETON. Could what?

PENDLETON. I don't know. Maybe I could get off on a hunting trip now and then. I'd sort of like to see South Africa before I die. I *would* like to see Africa.

MRS. PENDLETON [*starts up the stairs*]. Oh, you're so primitive! You'd better help me marry Harold off to Lydia Lane.

PENDLETON. Her father can endow her. If she nabs Harold I won't give him a penny, not a penny!

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, you're so cruel.

PENDLETON. Why do they make opera so long?

MRS. PENDLETON. Opera isn't so long. They've cut it down. [*Sneezes.*] But Maxwell's too stupid getting the car into line.

PENDLETON. Maxwell gets orders from me where to stand and then you change them! The poor fellow doesn't know what we want, and when he does drive up you're talking to that Mrs. —

MRS. PENDLETON [*comes down eagerly*]. Did you *see* whom I was talking to? That moment of talk clenched an invitation to send Adrienne to Palm Beach! She might meet a man there.

PENDLETON. Adrienne's not likely to meet *any* man *any*where that'll be of *any* use to her!

MRS. PENDLETON. I can't have you malign Adrienne. She's a perfect beauty to be *kept* for a brilliant match!

PENDLETON. Well, we've kept her twenty-five expensive years and we'll keep her.

MRS. PENDLETON. You talk as if you didn't *want* to keep her.

PENDLETON. Do you know I've just paid her dressmaker —

MRS. PENDLETON. But she had to have new evening gowns and the cloth of gold was marvellous with her hair. A gown for her portrait.

PENDLETON [*takes out a cigar*]. I'm not going to pay for any portrait of —

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, yes you are, Horace. Everybody is being done by Zanzer.

PENDLETON. Hire a cheaper artist and let him sign the name.

MRS. PENDLETON. I do believe I'm married to a crook! [*Starts up the stairs.*]

PENDLETON. Maybe you are. Anyhow, I'll have to be one to keep pace! I won't take an opera box next season. *There!* I've said *that!* [*He is relieved.*]

MRS. PENDLETON [*turns to give him a withering glance and comes down the stairs, one step for each word*]. *You won't take an opera box next season?* It's your civic duty to keep an opera box! It would be a disgrace to take our name off of the box list!

PENDLETON. What do you get from it? Nothing but flu!

MRS. PENDLETON. You can't fathom anything Horace. You don't know what it's all about. [*Impatiently.*] If Adrienne can be married off in Palm Beach — I'll take Titia to London in May and get her presented at court!

PENDLETON. And marry her off to a tottering title?

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, most titles need a little bolstering.

PENDLETON. Nothing doing! I'll not finance the two of you to London to pick up a ruin that needs *bathrooms!*

MRS. PENDLETON. You haven't any imagination to picture us related through marriage, *internationally!* You're just a machine without feeling. It even surprises me to *remember* I'm married to you.

PENDLETON. Maybe you want to be in the fashion and get rid of me.

MRS. PENDLETON. Desertion would be technical. [*Sneezes.*]

PENDLETON. Desertion? I? Office at nine? Home at six, out with you until midnight? I haven't time to *look* elsewhere!

MRS. PENDLETON. I *have* met men who do sympathize with my affectionate nature.

PENDLETON. Don't make yourself ridiculous, Cora.

MRS. PENDLETON [*sneezes*]. Oh, if I were more selfish I wouldn't try to run this elephant of a house with such incompetent servants! Oh, *other* men sympathize with —

PENDLETON [*starts up the stairs*]. The men who flatter you feel perfectly safe. They don't have to pay the bills.

MRS. PENDLETON. Bills! Always bills! Never a kind word to me. I've been wanting to go up to bed and sleep and you keep me arguing —

PENDLETON. I want sleep myself but you've been *blocking the staircase!*

MRS. PENDLETON [*weeps*]. You don't want an opera box. You want to humiliate me before the entire town. You wish I were in the vault! [*Sneezes.*]

PENDLETON. The *vault!?*

MRS. PENDLETON. I know you do. You said it was extravagant for us to build our *tomb* when we didn't have anybody to put *into* it! [*Wails.*] Well, you'll have *me* soon to put into it!

PENDLETON [*distracted*]. There, there, don't cry, I don't know what I said but whatever it was I apologize. You're tired.

[*Mrs. Pendleton sneezes.*]

PENDLETON. And cold.

MRS. PENDLETON. And hungry!

PENDLETON. How about some warm milk? I'll get you some. [*Goes down the stairs toward the adjoining room.*]

MRS. PENDLETON [*nods weakly and whimpers*]. Yes. [*She follows him.*] Horace!

PENDLETON. Yes?

MRS. PENDLETON. And if the servants didn't finish it — [*whimpers*] a big piece of that — chocolate cake.

PENDLETON. All right. [*Exit.*]

[*Mrs. Pendleton becomes aware of the burglar approaching her with revolver aimed. She opens her mouth as if to scream.*]

BURGLAR. Don't scream or I'll shoot. If you kick you'll get a quick ride to that family vault!

MRS. PENDLETON [*whispers*]. Where — wha — wh — wh —

BURGLAR. Ssh now. What I want's your rings, from the ears too and the bracelets. [*Takes them off.*] Help me; deliver the goods; what's that? You what? You *what?* Oh, you want to sneeze; all right, sneeze.

[*Mrs. Pendleton gasps from suppressing a sneeze, then sneezes.*]

BURGLAR. The necklace too, the necklace, I said. That's a good girl. If you make a sound I'll fix you. Now listen pretty. When I go out that front door I'll cover you with this close friend of mine and not one cry of warning from you before I'm off. Got me, old girl? That's it! Hand 'em over. Diamonds, emeralds, very obliging of you to wear 'em tonight. And that tirara it looks great but they've got that spotted, just paste. Now you just keep quiet and let me have time for a get-away and no hard feelings! [*Takes jewels, backs to the front door, covering her with revolver, and goes out quickly.*]

MRS. PENDLETON [*for a moment in panic cannot find her voice, then gives a terrific scream*]. Ah!!!!!! Horace! Horace! I've been robbed! I've been robbed!

GUSTA [*looking ridiculous in curl papers and a cheap kimono appears at the head of the stairs*]. Vat is? Vat is?

MRS. PENDLETON [*screaming*]. I've been robbed!

GUSTA [*screams and disappears*]. Thomas, Thomas! Burglars!

JANE [*appears at the head of the stairs in a pretty kimono, the one she has said Adrienne had given to her*]. Who's there?

MRS. PENDLETON. A burglar! A burglar!

JANE. Thomas! Thomas!

THOMAS [*rushes down the stairs putting on his coat*]. Where, Mrs. Pendleton, where?

MRS. PENDLETON. Do you think he'd sit and wait here for you to catch him? Oh, you terrible people! Why don't you stay up for us?

THOMAS. What did he look like?

MRS. PENDLETON [*has sunk into a hall chair and has a spasm of chills, stamping her feet in fear*]. Oh, I'll never get over that feeling of his hands!

PENDLETON [*enters from the adjoining room with a glass of milk and a large piece of chocolate cake*]. I heated the milk and —

MRS. PENDLETON. Didn't you hear me? Where have you been? Where *were* you?

PENDLETON. In the ice-box.

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, what a house! Didn't you hear me scream?

PENDLETON. Oh, was that you?

MRS. PENDLETON. I've been robbed! All my jewels!

PENDLETON. Robbed! Why, just a moment ago —

MRS. PENDLETON [*exaggerating in her fear*]. A burglar bound and gagged me and at the point of a revolver —

PENDLETON [*places the milk and cake upon the table*]. But where was the burglar?

THOMAS. I don't know, sir. I went all over the house and locked up thoroughly for the night. I am sure there was nobody here, sir, when I went upstairs.

PENDLETON. I'll telephone the police and a detective agency and we must examine every window and door at once, Thomas.

THOMAS. Yes sir. [*Follows Pendleton eagerly into the adjoining room.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. Don't leave me alone! I feel as if there was one hiding behind every chair.

JANE. I'll stay with you, madam.

MRS. PENDLETON. What's that noise? Sounds like somebody trying to get in.

JANE. It's the front door, madam.

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls in terror*]. Horace! Thomas! Somebody's trying to get in!

JANE. It's Mr. Harold.

MRS. PENDLETON [*relieved*]. Oh, Harold.

HAROLD [*enters the front door, slams it, and highly intoxicated berates the door-key which he gazes at cross-eyed*]. Naughty little lashkey! Dushn't fit! Only opens door upshide down. Don't know which shide's the meanest! Maybe's not the right house! [*His opera hat falls off and rolls away. He captures it by falling upon it and thereby shutting it.*] Come here, you grasshopper! If I make the schtairs in ten shlides I'm right, otherwise got to go out and find another house! [*Slides across hall trying to count but lurches against newel post.*] Caught the schtairs but lost the number, any-

way, any house's got beds, moshtly upschtairs. [*Tries to walk up but has difficulty. Takes one step up, slides back, tries to crawl up, slips, tries going up backward.*] Maybe a crab could, maybe I'm a crab, that's an idea. [*Loses his balance, sits and slides to the bottom.*] Shomeshing's wrong, shomeshing's terrubly wrong. Told him tashed like poison, but he makes it and he's a good fellow. Don't want to hurt hish feelings, don't want to hurt anybody's feelings — very nish people in the world, noshing against them, just love 'em all. [*Tries to go up the stairs again.*] Wonder if my cane's in my pocket. [*Searches pocket.*] No cane, funny, cane always in my pocket —

Mrs. Pendleton [*has been hiding and watching him. She now confronts him*]. Harold!

Harold [*lurches affectionately to embrace her*]. Mumsie! Darling Mumsie!

Mrs. Pendleton. Harold! You're intoxicated!

Harold. No, just love you, Mumsie! Have you been winning at bridge? Dad's so tight! Got to have money!

Mrs. Pendleton. I haven't been winning at bridge but I'll sell something if you'll promise to stop this drinking. But I can't even do that now, I've been robbed. A burglar came in and took all my jewels!

Harold. Pretty Mumsie!

Mrs. Pendleton. Harold, you're not listening to me.

Pendleton [*comes down the stairs followed by Thomas*]. We've been over the house and every window is securely locked. I telephoned the detective agency,

and Thomas and I are going right over there. Oh, when did *he* get in?

MRS. PENDLETON. Just now, and he's had too much.

PENDLETON [*seeing Harold lurch*]. This ends it! He reports to me tomorrow morning for a real job in the factory to earn his own living!

MRS. PENDLETON. You won't give him bread?

PENDLETON. He's not going to get any more money out of me, I've enough *women* to spend it on!

MRS. PENDLETON [*with sudden suspicion*]. What does that mean, Horace?

PENDLETON. I won't have any more checks going to the front row chorus!

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, Horace, Harold's not interested in chorus girls.

MR. PENDLETON. He reports in the morning for a job.

HAROLD. Next week, next week! Tomorrow I give a luncheon for Countish Norvkin — skinskinsky. [*Starts up the stairs.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, Harold, I can't come to it without my jewels, I'll look too naked!

HAROLD. Oh, Mumsie, you always wear too many dingle — dingle dangles anyway!

PENDLETON. Stop criticizing your mother!

[*Mrs. Pendleton sneezes.*]

PENDLETON. You don't seem to realize she's been robbed. You're in no fit condition to go out with me

to search. I have to rely upon Thomas! I don't know when we'll be back. [*Exit with Thomas through front door.*]

Mrs. Pendleton. Oh, do be careful! Don't let them slug you! I'm so frightened! and there'll be such terrible publicity!

Harold. Publishity! But you like that, Mumsie!

Mrs. Pendleton. I wouldn't mind if it were about something really helpful to us. An international marriage for Adrienne or of Titia to important men, I wouldn't care how much publicity there was about the orange blossoms but this —

Harold. Thish will tell the world how many juels you had!

Mrs. Pendleton. Too many questions will be asked. I don't want to explain my cabochon emerald is almost glass!

Harold [*surprised*]. Your Em — emera-ald ishn't real?

Mrs. Pendleton. Everything else is. Do you suppose I could wear it if everything else wasn't? But whatever happens we cannot have *that* exposed! We must preserve the dignity of the family in the *public eye!*

Harold. Thath what I shay. *Keep* in the public eye but don't bru — bru — *bruise* it!

Mrs. Pendleton. Jane, you've got to stay in my room. You can sleep on my couch. I shall faint if I see another burglar.

JANE. Yes, madam.

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, my opal!

HAROLD. Shouldn't have schtairs on a boat. [*Holds on to banister.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, I'm so weak. I must eat or I won't last. [*Takes chocolate cake from table and biting into it ravenously goes up the stairs.*] I always starve myself so at dinner. Bring the milk up, Jane.

JANE. Yes, madam.

MRS. PENDLETON [*stops when she reaches Harold and talks at him with her mouth full of cake*]. Harold, you break my heart when you're this way. [*She continues up the stairs and disappears.*]

[*Jane follows up the stairs carrying the milk.*]

HAROLD [*lurches toward Jane*]. Pretty, pretty!

[*Jane dodges him and disappears quickly.*]

[*Mrs. Pendleton, upstairs, sneezes.*]

HAROLD [*laughs and digs into his pockets*]. Wheresh my cane? [*He does not notice the greenbacks that flutter from his pocket upon the stairs.*] No need for boat rocking like thish. Going to upper deck. Got a berth up there. Wait, Captain, till I get up. It's a rough sea! Nightie night! [*Waves his hands and disappears upstairs.*]

[*The clock strikes three.*]

INTERMISSION IF DESIRED

[THE CLOCK STRIKES FOUR]

THOMAS [*uses a key and enters through the front door, hurrying to the telephone; the scene is effective if the telephone is imagined in the clothes closet*]. Main 9321. [*Waits.*] Pshaw! [*Hangs up annoyed at having got the busy signal. Paces the room and returns.*] Main 9321.

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls from upstairs*]. Gusta, Gusta!

GUSTA [*from upstairs*]. Vat is? Vat is?

MRS. PENDLETON. Go upstairs into cook's bedroom and bring me that tube of capsicum. I gave it to her this evening for her rheumatism.

GUSTA. Capsi-vat?

MRS. PENDLETON. Cum, cum, capsicum, in a red tube. If I don't rub some of it on my chest I'll have pneumonia.

THOMAS. Main 9321. Central, don't give me the busy signal again. It's very important. Cut in on that wire. Oh, blow your rules! [*Hangs up receiver and hurries up the stairs and disappears.*]

GUSTA [*a second later calls softly at head of stairs*]. Yane, Yane, Yane.

JANE [*appears at head of stairs*]. Did you call me?

GUSTA. Hist, I go upstairs to cook, she say she leaf zat stuff down in de kitchen. I run upstairs, I run downstairs, always dey make me run! Dey tink I am a

centepede! Maybe burglar in de kitchen. You come vid me.

JANE [*peers over the banister cautiously*]. There wouldn't be another now. [*But she is not convinced.*]

GUSTA. So dark in kitchen to find lights. Come vid me. [*She grabs Jane's hand and together they start a cautious journey downward. When they get midway Mrs. Pendleton calls from above.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. Where are you, Jane? Help me with my dress. I tried to get it over my head and it has stuck!

GUSTA. Dat voman! Alvays she vant someting!

MRS. PENDLETON. Jane, Jane, I'm stuck! The beads caught in my hair! Quick! Quick!

JANE. I've got to go. [*Dashes up the stairs and disappears.*]

GUSTA. Oh, she mak me so mad! [*Looks about terrified, but cautiously continues down the stairs, stopping at intervals to listen, and goes into adjoining room.*]

THOMAS [*appears at the head of the stairs with a small package of letters and hurries down to the telephone*]. Main 9321. I want to talk to the proprietor. Hello, Mr. Campana, this is Thomas Smith. You know that matter I was telling you about the other night. Was she at your place this evening? Well, stop the music. You've got to hear me. When are you closing? How many couples there? I say was she there? I don't want to say her name over the 'phone. Yes, yes, Pendleton. I'm here now. What time did she leave? It's after

four now. How many with her? Where'd she go? Ask the doorman, will you? I'll hold the wire.

GUSTA [*enters from adjoining room with the capsicum, reaches the stairs, feels the presence of someone without seeing Thomas, picks up her skirts showing low comedy shoes and bare legs to the knees, and goes up the stairs in comic flight, dropping the capsicum with a scream of fear*]. Oh, oh, oh!

JANE. Did you get it? [*Appears at the head of the stairs.*]

GUSTA. Ya, I got it, but I dropped it. Oh, I von't go after it!

JANE. Oh, there can't be anybody down there. I'll go. [*Starts down the stairs cautiously.*]

THOMAS. Jane.

JANE [*startled*]. Oh, you — back? Oh, Gusta, it's only Thomas.

GUSTA [*at the top of the stairs*]. Vy you frighten me so? [*Disappears.*]

THOMAS. I didn't know you were coming down.

JANE. How did you get in? The back door's bolted.

THOMAS [*at telephone*]. All right, thanks. [*Hangs up. To Jane.*] Mr. Pendleton gave me his key. I came back for these, going out again.

JANE. Oh, will anything happen to you? Where's Mr. Pendleton?

THOMAS. I'm to meet him again at the detective agency.

JANE. But the burglar must be miles away by this time.

THOMAS. I'm not so sure about that. Leave it to me.

[*Puts his arm around Jane and walks her to the electric light button where he switches out some lights; then he kisses her.*]

JANE [*giggles*]. I suppose you're saving electricity.

THOMAS. You wait. There'll be fire-works here before morning. Now, I've got to beat it! [*Exit through front door.*]

JANE. Oh, do be careful.

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls from upstairs*]. Well, well, must I wait until breakfast for the capsicum?

JANE [*picks up the tube*]. I have it, madam. [*Goes up the stairs and disappears.*]

[*Lawrence unlocks the front door and allows Adrienne to enter. Adrienne wears an evening wrap and gown and shivers slightly with cold.*]

LAWRENCE [*closes the door and offers Adrienne the key*]. The magic key, mademoiselle.

[*Adrienne puts key into her vanity bag.*]

LAWRENCE [*puts his hat down and takes off his overcoat*]. There can't be much objection to my sitting in the hall.

ADRIENNE [*glances accurately at her watch*]. Its four-thirty-six A.M.

LAWRENCE. If we're the last to come in who's going to care if I stay?

ADRIENNE. We may not be the last. Harold's usually very late and Titia's out with Dane Norton.

LAWRENCE. Let me take off your boots.

ADRIENNE. It's cold. [*Sits on the stairs and lets Lawrence take off her carriage boots.*] Your taxi man will freeze.

LAWRENCE. Fine! Maybe the meter will freeze too.

ADRIENNE. Oh, so.

LAWRENCE. Now Adrienne, my darling, we'll have an explanation.

ADRIENNE. Yes, Lawrence, my darling, we'll consider expiation!

LAWRENCE. You're so flippant, you drive me wild!

ADRIENNE. Don't raise your voice. [*Glances up the stairs.*] They'll put you out.

LAWRENCE. What would your father say?

ADRIENNE. How should I know? I haven't seen him for days. He doesn't understand me anyway.

LAWRENCE. Does your mother?

ADRIENNE. Harold's her pet. But I'm glad we're not a bothering family. What a bore to have a lot of snoopy relatives!

LAWRENCE. Adrienne, you've changed these years since I've been away.

ADRIENNE. What makes you say that? Five years ago I didn't exist for you.

LAWRENCE. Now you are impossible! I'm furious!

ADRIENNE. Five years ago you had no emotion for me. Now, that I have grown impossible I arouse your fury. That's a gorgeous compliment!

LAWRENCE. You are not at all as you were.

ADRIENNE. My gown has a different cut, perhaps a better color.

LAWRENCE. Have you no feeling?

ADRIENNE [*likes to pose with her fan*]. Why, yes, having you make love to me is simply divine!

LAWRENCE. But it leaves you cold. When dancing with you tonight I held you in my arms and yet they seemed empty of you. Adrienne! [*He embraces and kisses her impetuously. Adrienne endures it and when released, unconcernedly rearranges her hair and opens her vanity case to powder her nose.*]

LAWRENCE. Why don't you say something? Why don't you slap me in the face and order me to go?

ADRIENNE. I'm not so archaic.

LAWRENCE. You're too used to admiration, I suppose. I wonder, I wonder, what door you *will* open some day.

ADRIENNE. Door?

LAWRENCE. Life is like a palace with many doors. We have the chance of using almost any one of the latchkeys. We may choose a wrong one.

ADRIENNE. What a funny idea.

LAWRENCE. Or we may take the right one. Would you come back with me into the Northwest? You'll like my ranch and it has a decent house too.

ADRIENNE. But it's lonely out there.

LAWRENCE. Ah, yes. You must have an audience to admire you in your latest gown. Oh, your beauty makes me furious! I don't know why I bother with you.

ADRIENNE. Yes, why do you?

LAWRENCE. Spirit of the chase!

ADRIENNE. I don't like rough clothes — Would you have me climbing mountains in chiffon?

LAWRENCE. But imagine seeing you in chiffon!

ADRIENNE. Yes, imagine!

LAWRENCE. Your exquisite throat line —

ADRIENNE [*turns her head*]. Have you noticed it? Zanzer is going to paint it.

LAWRENCE. If I gave up the ranch and came back to live here would that be a price for your surrender?

ADRIENNE. But Lawrence, I'm not in love with you.

LAWRENCE. Is there someone else?

ADRIENNE. Perhaps.

LAWRENCE. Don't tease me.

ADRIENNE. I'll tell you. You ought to marry Titia. We're sisters, on account of that, something alike.

LAWRENCE. Not alike at all.

ADRIENNE. Nevertheless Titia and you could hit it off. There, they must be coming now, Titia and Dane. [*Eagerly.*] Dane's got a new car and he wanted to give Titia the first ride. I'm dying to know all about

it. They probably went to the Country Club and danced. Dane dances divinely. Dane's the best dancer in town. Dane's very popular!

LAWRENCE. Damn Dane! I'm not half through talking to you. Let's hide.

ADRIENNE. Oh, no. I want to see them. I want to ask Dane —

LAWRENCE. It isn't fair to spoil his good-night.

ADRIENNE. Isn't fair to eavesdrop.

LAWRENCE. If they see me I'll have to go. Come.

ADRIENNE [*resists as he takes her arm*]. No.

LAWRENCE. I said, "come." [*Forces her to hide with him.*]

TITIA [*has unlocked the front door and enters holding the key which she places carelessly upon a table as she tosses off her evening wrap. Without waiting for Dane's slower actions she lights a cigarette and offers him a match, but he refuses to smoke*]. Come in, Dane, I want to talk to you.

DANE. But it's five-ten, it wouldn't look —

TITIA. Nonsense, have a cigarette.

DANE. But if anyone should see my car —

TITIA. Nobody's going to steal it although I grant it's a beauty.

DANE. But if the neighbors —

TITIA. Are you afraid of compromising yourself?

DANE. Not myself, but you.

TITIA. Well, come in then —

DANE. But it's five-ten —

TITIA. Five in the morning isn't much different from five in the afternoon!

DANE. But most people think so.

TITIA. You're always screwing yourself into the measurement of other people's thoughts! Stop being conventional.

DANE [*looks about cautiously*]. But your family —

TITIA. Oh, Adrienne's probably in by this time. Ah, here's a bill on the stairs, that's ample proof Harold has passed this way. No-one need disturb us but the postman and that's some time off.

DANE. Titia, I can't make you out at all.

TITIA. I'm trying to prove to you that I'm not at all the type for you to marry. Adrienne's your type. You're both so formal that when you talk to each other there's a glass wall between you; both afraid of cutting your fingers — or your lips!

DANE. I wouldn't dare.

TITIA. I know it. But with me, try.

DANE. Will you let me?

TITIA. Let you? You might give me a sample kiss anyway. I'd never dream of taking a *gown* without feeling the material, why a *husband?*

DANE. Titia! [*Kisses her with reverence.*]

TITIA. Well, I'm willing to recommend it. But oh, bother! The whole world is in love with somebody else!

DANE. And are you?

TITIA. Worse luck! It's like the serpent biting his own tail. You're in love with me, I'm in love with him, he's in love with her, and she's in love with you.

DANE. Who's in love with me?

TITIA. Adrienne.

DANE. Adrienne?

TITIA. Adrienne.

[*Adrienne hiding with Lawrence tries to draw away from him and come out to deny the charge.*]

DANE. What's that noise?

TITIA [*shrugs her shoulders*]. Oh, a late mouse — scampering home from a cheese cotillion.

DANE. Good-night.

TITIA [*seizes his hand*]. I want to tell you about Adrienne.

DANE. She's scarcely aware of me.

TITIA. That's her complex. She's so in love with you she's afraid of showing it. To hide her feelings she wears a mask of cold indifference, but below that *ice* — Oh!

DANE. Titia, it is you —

TITIA. Dane, if you only realized how Adrienne's much —

ADRIENNE [*fights off Lawrence's hold and comes out in agitated denial*]. Titia! You're making up a lot of lies! Don't believe her, Dane!

TITIA [*startled*]. You!

DANE. What? Well of all the —

TITIA. So you've been hiding and spying on us!

LAWRENCE. I'll explain.

TITIA [*jealously*]. No doubt in each other's arms!

ADRIENNE. You little fool, you know I don't —

TITIA. I don't know anything. Maybe, Dane, you're only past history with her after all. [*There is a pounding at the front door.*]

LAWRENCE. Maybe that's my taxi driver. It's time for me to go anyway.

TITIA. Stay where you are! I'll see who it is! [*Hurries to the front door.*]

DANE [*precedes her and opens it*]. What do you want?

LAWRENCE [*to Adrienne*]. That's the truth then, is it? [*Adrienne turns away embarrassed.*]

DANE [*to Titia*]. The driver says he's cold and wants to be paid.

TITIA. Tell him to go. Here's a fiver.

DANE. I've got some.

TITIA. Hurry up. Take this! [*Gives Dane the bill she has picked up on the staircase.*]

LAWRENCE. Wait. I'm ready to go.

DANE [*at the door*]. There you are, keep the change. [*Closes door.*]

TITIA [*to Lawrence*]. No, you're not ready yet. We've something to talk about. We paid him. You've been letting him freeze five dollars' worth.

[*Lawrence takes money out of his pocket and hands a bill to Titia.*]

TITIA [*takes it with a quaint smile*]. Thanks.

DANE. I'll run you home, Bradley.

LAWRENCE. The fault's mine. I stayed because I wanted to ask Adrienne — well, each of us has had an answer. Let's go Norton.

DANE. Yes, it's *high* time!

TITIA [*eagerly*]. Did Adrienne turn you down?

ADRIENNE. That's not a fair question.

TITIA. Did she?

LAWRENCE. That's what you call it.

TITIA. Yes, because she's in love with Dane!

ADRIENNE. Oh, I don't know what I could do to you! Titia!

LAWRENCE. Poor deal all around. Are you going south, Norton?

DANE. Yes.

TITIA [*restrains Lawrence*]. Wait a moment. You're afraid to look at the cards. Throw them down and see what we can make of them.

LAWRENCE. Wait till tomorrow, Titia.

TITIA. It's tomorrow *now.* I'm not going to sit around and wait for you to find out about me! I've just as much right as you have to try to get what I want.

ADRIENNE. Titia, you'll regret —

TITIA. Adrienne's coated with ice but she's fire inside. She cares for Dane because he seems so unattainable —

DANE. I don't believe it.

TITIA. But Lawrence, I can understand you as Adrienne never could. You and I don't hide so much and we speak as we feel. You've overlooked me because I'm younger, but I'll know how to play with you.

ADRIENNE. Titia, you're outrageous!

TITIA. Oh, I'm sick of cramping myself into the pattern everybody wants me to live in. I'm sick of the city and of the people one meets. There are so many clever ones you shouldn't know and so many dull ones you should.

ADRIENNE. Don't listen to her.

TITIA. And we get so tired chasing about. What's it all for? Oh, I want to find something worth while to hold on to.

LAWRENCE. Sure, that's it, Titia, that's the way I feel.

TITIA. Oh, Lawrence, you play at living so well. I could make a success of you. Adrienne needs Dane and furs and brocades and he'll appreciate her at the

head of his table, but I — I'll go camping with you in knickers and I don't mind — *mice!*

ADRIENNE. Titia, how *can* you?

LAWRENCE. Why, I think it's splendid of her!

[*Policeman pounds at the front door.*]

ALL. Who's that?

DANE. Go on Bradley, it's your turn now.

LAWRENCE [*opens the front door*]. What is it?

POLICEMAN [*enters*]. I came —

ADRIENNE [*frightened*]. A policeman!

TITIA. What do you want here?

POLICEMAN [*with Irish accent*]. Now tell me who was for givin' the taxi driver a foive dollar bill?

DANE. I did.

TITIA. No, I did.

POLICEMAN. Sure an' shiftin' the blame, ye aire, aire ye?

TITIA. I gave it to him [*points to Dane*] and he gave it to him.

POLICEMAN. No matter where the hymns be, what I'm wantin' to know is where did you get it?

TITIA. Where I got it?

POLICEMAN. Sure, where did you get it?

TITIA. Sure, Officer, I plucked it off the staircase.

POLICEMAN. Well, well, you plucked it off the staircase, did ye!

TITIA. Sure, Officer, right there.

POLICEMAN. It's a foine staircase, ye have. Do you grow foive dollar bills on 'em every saison?

TITIA [*imitating him*]. Sure, every saison, like poinsettias on Christmas bushes!

POLICEMAN. See here now, none o' your lip!

DANE. No insolence from you! I'll explain.

POLICEMAN. Sure, I'm not alookin' fer long explanaitions. Come along with me an' tell yer troubles to the Judge.

LAWRENCE [*aside to Adrienne and Titia whom he has been trying to persuade to go upstairs*]. Go up, girls, we'll get him out.

DANE. Don't wake up the family.

POLICEMAN. No, I guess you don't want to wake 'em up, sittin' here palaverin' in the hall at this hour in the marnin'.

TITIA. And what's wrong, Officer, in *married* couples sitting in the hall at this hour in the morning?

POLICEMAN. An' it's married ye aire, aire ye?

TITIA. Yes, that's her husband [*indicates Dane*] and he's mine. [*Clings to Lawrence.*]

POLICEMAN. Aw go long wid ye, there's a car outside, they're both door-steppin'!

TITIA. I don't know what door-stepping means but if you want proof, our guests will go. Good-night, Adrienne, dear; [*kisses and pushes Adrienne*] so glad you came. Good-night Dane, better wrap Adrienne up well. Her cloak's not very warm and see that you put the blanket very carefully around her knees.

ADRIENNE. But —

DANE. But —

POLICEMAN [*to Dane*]. What's your name?

TITIA [*interrupts*]. Mr. and Mrs. Dane Norton.

DANE. I say —

LAWRENCE [*with a glance up the stairs*]. Don't argue.

DANE. All right, come Adrienne. [*Flings cloak about Adrienne and leads her out of front door. They exeunt chatting excitedly.*]

TITIA. Now, what's it all about?

POLICEMAN. That bill was phony.

LAWRENCE. Have you it with you?

POLICEMAN. I have not. The bill's at the station to show to the judge.

LAWRENCE. Doesn't it occur to you that we also might have been stung?

POLICEMAN. Right, and what I got to find out is where you got it.

TITIA. Who gave it to you?

POLICEMAN. Taxi driver went into the restaurant around the corner. Said he was chilled, wanted coffee,

said there was queer doin's up here kapin' him out in the cold and not wantin' to pay him. Then when he handed over the bill the cashier wouldn't taik it, said it was no good.

LAWRENCE. Not so loud, Officer, come around at a decent time.

POLICEMAN. Sure, this ain't no jokin' matter!

MRS. PENDLETON [*upstairs*]. Who's there?

TITIA. Titia.

MRS. PENDLETON. Who's with you?

TITIA. Lawrence.

MRS. PENDLETON. It's a fine time in the morning!

TITIA. Lawrence is protecting me, mother.

LAWRENCE. There's an intruder, Mrs. Pendleton.

MRS. PENDLETON [*appears at the head of the stairs in a fluttering dressing-gown and disappears as quickly*]. A policeman! Harold! Wake up! Wake up! Titia's arrested!

TITIA. Now you've done it!

LAWRENCE. Of all the stupid — Oh, get out of here!

[*Tries to push policeman out. Policeman aroused, takes the push as an attack and clinches in a fight on the landing with Lawrence.*]

TITIA [*retreats up the stairs screaming*]. Help! Help!

MRS. PENDLETON [*reappearing at the head of the stairs*]. Help!

TITIA. Help!

MRS. PENDLETON. Harold! Harold!

HAROLD. Whash's matter?

MRS. PENDLETON. Hurry, hurry!

HAROLD. I'm in my pashamas!

MRS. PENDLETON. I don't care what you're in. Jane! Gusta! Help!

TITIA [*returns*]. Oh, he's killing him!

HAROLD [*appears at the top of the stairs in fashionable pajamas and hurries down with the courage of the intoxicated, unconscious of danger. He flings himself against the clinched fighters on the landing*]. Whash the matter? Mushn't fight — mushn't —

POLICEMAN [*flings Lawrence down the stairs in order to face Harold*]. An' who aire you?

[*Harold stands blinking at the policeman.*]

TITIA [*rushes down the stairs and flings her arms about the prostrate form of Lawrence*]. Oh, he's killed him! Lawrence! Lawrence!

POLICEMAN. Well, who aire ye?

HAROLD. Don't know. Wash ashleep. Can't see. No light for owls. [*Blinks.*]

POLICEMAN [*inhales*]. Holy Smoke! I wish I had *that!*

MRS. PENDLETON [*starts down the stairs*]. What is all this?

HAROLD [*with superb gesture*]. Schtand back! Captain wants to talk to me!

TITIA. Oh, he's dead. [*Kisses Lawrence passionately.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. What'll we do? What'll we do?

LAWRENCE [*opens his eyes and murmurs to Titia*]. Do it again.

TITIA [*with less conviction and more fervor*]. Oh, he's dead. [*Kisses Lawrence again.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. If he's dead, call the undertaker.

TITIA. Not yet. I don't think he's quite dead. Can you move?

LAWRENCE [*blissfully*]. Don't want to.

MRS. PENDLETON. It's a scandal. Seven o'clock in the morning and your father not in yet!

TITIA. Why? Where's father?

POLICEMAN. I ain't goin' till I find out 'bout that bill. She says they grow on the staircase.

HAROLD [*with dawning consciousness searches the pockets of his pajamas*]. Bills! Bills! Ha! Ha! That's right, my cane wasn't in my pockets either! Gone with the bills! Did you find them? Were you bringing them back? Sure, they're mine!

POLICEMAN. Where did you pick 'em?

HAROLD. Ha, ha, that's stage money!

MRS. PENDLETON. Titia, what are you doing with that dead man down there?

TITIA. He's reviving, slowly. I think I have helped him. Have I?

LAWRENCE [*with fervor as he rises*]. I could die a thousand such deaths!

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, my nerves! Where's Adrienne?

TITIA. In jail, I hope.

MRS. PENDLETON. In jail?

TITIA. With Dane, I hope.

MRS. PENDLETON. Have they been speeding? Oh, I shall faint!

JANE. Oh, madam, shall I get you some smelling salts?

MRS. PENDLETON. Do you think I have time to *smell* when I want to *hear?*

JANE. Yes, madam, no, madam.

POLICEMAN. Sure now, what about the foive dollars?

HAROLD. The joke's on you. I didn't have anything but stage money in my pockets. I say, Lawrence, have you —

LAWRENCE. Certainly. Here, Officer, 's ten dollars. You can keep the change.

POLICEMAN [*takes money from Lawrence, holds it to the light to make sure it is good and scratches his head*]. All right, but what you tryin' to pass off stage money for?

TITIA. I told you I plucked it off the staircase. Harold spills them.

HAROLD [*laughs*]. They stuffed my pockets full, a dozen chorus girls. Shome girls! They let me wasch the show from the wings.

POLICEMAN. Where?

HAROLD. Follies! If you don't believe me go ask. I take 'em out to supper and they pay me back in stage money.

MRS. PENDLETON. He's rambling in his head, Policeman.

LAWRENCE. That's the answer, Officer, isn't it? And you've got your money and you're on your way —

POLICEMAN. Sure, an' I guess he's a woild one! [*Exit through front door.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. Harold, you with chorus girls! What's Titia mean coming home at this time and Adrienne in jail! Oh, my nerves! And your father out in the underworld searching for my jewels! Oh, what a night! Your father was complaining that nothing happens!

TITIA. But what is the matter, mother?

MRS. PENDLETON. I was robbed, robbed, right here in my own house. Everything taken, a masked burglar —

TITIA. You were robbed? When?

MRS. PENDLETON. When we came home from the opera.

LAWRENCE. But Mrs. Pendleton, have you any clues? Let me help search.

MRS. PENDLETON. Horace took Thomas with him. They ought to be back. Perhaps they're lying in an alley with gashes pouring out blood! Oh, this frightful city!

HAROLD. Don't get hysterical, darling!

TITIA. Lawrence, do you suppose father *could* have had an accident?

HAROLD. He's running a goose chase! Those detectives like to appear so smart!

TITIA. Lawrence, hadn't we better go out and look for him?

LAWRENCE. Anything you say. [*Starts.*]

MRS. PENDLETON. What a family! Oh, my nerves! And I've such indigestion from all this excitement and that chocolate cake. Gusta, go into the kitchen and bring me some baking soda.

GUSTA [*from upstairs*]. I am not dressed.

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls upstairs*]. Nobody *wants* to look at you. And don't bring the baking *powder* as you did last time. Remember the box with the arm on it? [*Crooks her arm.*] Oh, oh, it makes me sick! To lose is worse than never having had at all! And oh, your poor father, your poor father! [*Sees Mr. Pendleton.*] Oh, there you are! [*Her tone of relief changes to accusation.*] How dare you keep me in such suspense!

PENDLETON [*his hair is stringy and wet, his tie awry. As he clutches a handful of jewels he is triumphant, weary, and furious all in one. He goes straight toward Harold with shaking fist*]. I've found them! I've

found them! You rascal, thief, I disown you! Leave my house!

MRS. PENDLETON. Horace!

PENDLETON [*does not see Titia and Lawrence*]. I guessed it but it seemed too impossible to be true. But the detectives followed up a lead given us by Thomas and it ended on the finger and the throat of a woman in the chorus.

MRS. PENDLETON [*grabs the jewels*]. Oh, my jewels!

PENDLETON. But it's your son! Don't you understand? Your *son?* He hires a professional thief to rob you and put you to that terror and loss!

MRS. PENDLETON [*weeps*]. Oh, Harold, it can't be Harold.

PENDLETON. Yes, it's your Harold, your darling Harold. You see the downward pace he's going! He gave his latchkey to an accomplice, was waiting himself around the corner. The thief brought them to Harold and the woman was in the car with him. Thomas has guessed something about this alliance. Her letters are here, Harold. [*Waves package Thomas came back to get.*] There is no possibility of denial!

MRS. PENDLETON. Harold, *say* something! Say *something!*

HAROLD. He shut down on my allowance! What else could I do?

MRS. PENDLETON. But to treat me like that, your mother!

PENDLETON. Haven't you any conscience? What has made you this way? Can't we instill any of the decencies into you? If you haven't any human emotion, can't we at least reach your pride, your — I don't know what — your desire to be respected by the community, to keep yourself and your family out of disgrace?

HAROLD. Out of disgrace? That's just *it!* I *couldn't* cash in on *anybody else but the family!*

PENDLETON [*yells*]. What?

HAROLD [*gaining in his haphazard idea*]. I say I was extremely *discreet* to *stick* to the family!

PENDLETON. *Stick to the family! ! ! !*

HAROLD [*getting bolder and with a sense of humor*]. Sure! I wouldn't create unpleasant publicity for her by stealing!

PENDLETON. Don't you call this stealing?

HAROLD. No! I was just *relieving* her of more than she ought to wear anyway.

PENDLETON. Well, I'll be —

MRS. PENDLETON. But this will be in the papers! There's been so much already!

HAROLD. We can hush it up and pay them off. Don't worry about that, Mumsie!

PENDLETON. Don't call her "Mumsie."

MRS. PENDLETON [*wails*]. He's called me that ever since he was a little boy!

PENDLETON. What can a man do with a family like this! [*Seeing Lawrence for the first time.*] And a stranger to hear it too!

TITIA. It's all right, he'll be in the family soon. He might as well learn about it now.

PENDLETON. What?

LAWRENCE. Yes, Mr. Pendleton, with your permission —

PENDLETON. I haven't heard anything about you. I haven't met you. I haven't seen Titia since last week. I don't even know your name.

LAWRENCE. Lawrence Bradley of Colby and Bradley originally, but I'm out west now in —

MRS. PENDLETON. You're going to marry Lawrence, but Titia, *London* —

TITIA. I don't care a whoop about London!

MRS. PENDLETON. But Titia, you're spoiling all my plans!

HAROLD. But Lawrence and you, I thought it was Adrienne —

TITIA. No, it's Adrienne and Dane —

THOMAS [*enters the front door followed by Adrienne and Dane*]. Careful, Miss Adrienne, does it hurt?

MRS. PENDLETON. What's the matter now? I can't stand another thing!

THOMAS. Accident, madam.

PENDLETON. Accident —

THOMAS. Just a slight one. Miss Adrienne —

PENDLETON, MRS. PENDLETON, TITIA. Adrienne!

THOMAS. Turned her ankle — on the ice —

TITIA. Dane! What happened?

DANE. We went out in such a hurry — her high heels on the ice —

PENDLETON. Adrienne, my child, you've let your hair grow since I saw you last!

ADRIENNE. No, father, I bought some. Zanzer didn't want to paint the shape of my skull.

TITIA. But where have you been?

DANE. Sitting in my car.

LAWRENCE. You must be frozen.

ADRIENNE [*has a rather radiant appearance*]. It wasn't cold, but it was getting too light to stay out and Thomas found us.

MRS. PENDLETON. But Titia, you said Adrienne was in jail. I never know whether to believe these children or not.

ADRIENNE. Well, mother, I'm going to be locked up at last with Dane as the jailor.

PENDLETON. You what?

DANE. I hope you have no objections, sir.

PENDLETON. I haven't heard anything about you. I haven't met you. I don't even know your name.

DANE. Dane Norton, sir, of —

ADRIENNE. Oh, father, you know, the Nortons — moth balls.

HAROLD. Adrienne to Dane, but I thought it was Titia —

MRS. PENDLETON. Adrienne! But your invitation to Palm Beach! That invitation to Palm Beach! You don't know what it might have meant to you — you know what I mean —

ADRIENNE. No, mother, it's settled this way!

THOMAS. Shall I call a doctor, Miss?

ADRIENNE [*with a smile*]. No, don't call the doctor.

PENDLETON. Have I heard correctly? Are you both going to be *married* or are you *only* engaged?

HAROLD. Looks like a go this time. That leaves only me, mother, for your ambitions!

MRS. PENDLETON. Oh, Harold! You've all I have left! It's just terrible the way I'm treated! I can't stay in this house another moment! I'm going to Europe — tomorrow!

PENDLETON. Yes, go to — Europe!

ADRIENNE. But our weddings?

MRS. PENDLETON. I can't be bothered! I'm a sick woman! You can both elope!

LAWRENCE. That's the best idea of all.

TITIA. Yes, let's elope!

ADRIENNE. But *I* must have a big *church* wedding!

PENDLETON. Certainly, she's got to be decently married!

MRS. PENDLETON. Church wedding? Well then, I'll stay for that but I have to get to London in time to launch Harold into the season!

PENDLETON. *London?* Harold?

MRS. PENDLETON. Harold's the only hope we have left now.

PENDLETON. Hope? *Hope?*

MRS. PENDLETON [*with emotional pride*]. Of making ourselves *international!*

HAROLD. Oh, Mumsie, how brilliant you are! We'll go to London! [*Exit upstairs arm in arm with Mrs. Pendleton.*]

PENDLETON [*almost tearing his hair in dismay*]. Well of all the — well of all the —

[*There is a thump at the front door, and there is a general start and glance of anxiety toward the door, with an exclamation, "What's that?" There is an ominous, tense pause.*]

THOMAS [*with the deliberate formality of a butler opens the door and brings in the morning newspapers*]. The morning newspapers.

[*There is a general sigh of relief.*]

TITIA. I'm hungry, let's go make some coffee.

ADRIENNE [*shivers and walks without a limp*]. Oh, I'm beginning to feel cold.

TITIA [*surprised at Adrienne's agility*]. Why, Adrienne, your ankle!

ADRIENNE. My what? Oh, yes. [*Quickly limps painfully.*] Oh, my ankle.

DANE. We'd better be going, it's half past seven.

LAWRENCE. How silly a tux looks in the morning.

TITIA. Come on, I'll cook breakfast for you.

PENDLETON. Are you girls really going to *marry* or are you only *engaged?*

LAWRENCE. Your daughters are peaches, Mr. Pendleton!

DANE. Yes, Mr. Pendleton, finest in town!

[*Exeunt Titia, Adrienne, Dane, and Lawrence into adjoining room.*]

PENDLETON [*shakes his head*]. It's more than I can make out.

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls from upstairs*]. Gusta! Gusta! Gusta!!

GUSTA [*enters from adjoining room where she has been listening to the conversation*]. Yes mam, I com. [*She carries a box of baking soda.*]

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls from upstairs*]. Where have you been all this time? Couldn't you find the baking soda?

GUSTA. I haf it. [*Approaches Mr. Pendleton.*] Mr. Pendleton, if de young ladies get married and if Mrs. Pendleton and Mr. Harold vill go to Europe I suppose dat means dat de house vill be in vite sheets like it was last summer and I vill not again —

PENDLETON. You mean you want to leave?

GUSTA. I got to know in time. I must gif my leaf befor I gets it handed *me!*

PENDLETON. Then consider yourself dismissed!

GUSTA [*furiously sets down the box of soda upon the stairs*]. Ver vell! I go! Let *Yane* bring her her baking soda! [*She flaunts out into adjoining room.*]

JANE [*has entered during the foregoing, and now takes the box*]. Oh, Mr. Pendleton, if you're going to be alone in the house may Thomas and I stay?

PENDLETON. You and Thomas?

JANE. Thomas and I would like to be married and stay here. We like the house, sir.

PENDLETON. You *like* the house! You are an employee and you are entirely satisfied with the place?

JANE. And we like you, sir, and the family.

PENDLETON. I can't understand your liking the family and the family won't understand your liking the house. I don't know what we want but we don't want what we have. But if there were a couple to look after *me*, no matter in what direction the family went, I'd endow them for life!

JANE. Oh, thank you, Mr. Pendleton. You see Thomas and I are the only ones in the house who appreciate the Innes in the drawing-room and the jade tree in the dining-room.

PENDLETON. The which tree?

JANE. The Chinese jade.

PENDLETON. Yes, oh, yes; five hundred dollars!

JANE. Thomas is an artist, sir.

PENDLETON [*with the gleam of a business man's shrewdness leaping into his eyes*]. Is he? Well, tell him to paint Miss Adrienne and beat off that robber Zanzer!

JANE. Oh, Tom could! Tom makes lovely sketches!

THOMAS. And I'm not a bad cook, either.

PENDLETON. Cook?

THOMAS. Yes, you'll only need us sir, when you're here *alone.*

JANE. And I can clean. You won't be needing to shut up the rooms and cover up the furniture.

PENDLETON. That's a help. The house does look ghastly in sheets!

JANE [*shudders*]. I wouldn't like it at all.

PENDLETON. Now, I'll hurry and change my clothes! Such a night! Not a wink of sleep!

JANE. You must be very tired.

PENDLETON. I am, but I have an appointment at the office at eight-thirty.

THOMAS. Then is it settled that we can stay, sir?

PENDLETON. Thomas, after this terrible experience I feel you have my interests at heart. I admire your keen wits too, even though they led to my son in a way that —

THOMAS. Perhaps it is better, as Mr. Harold says, that he didn't do it outside the family.

PENDLETON. You mean in the eyes of the world the honor of the family is still intact?

JANE. Mrs. Pendleton may be successful with Harold, sir, in an international marriage.

PENDLETON. No doubt she will. I am afraid she will.

JANE. Oh, sir, I think a great change has come into all our lives tonight.

THOMAS. Jane and I will try to make you very comfortable.

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls from upstairs*]. Gusta! Gusta! The baking soda!

JANE. Yes, madam. [*Starts upward.*]

MR. PENDLETON. I'll take it. [*Takes box from Jane and goes up the stairs.*] Well, I'd rather go to South Africa — still, the next best thing is a vacation in the city —

MRS. PENDLETON [*calls from upstairs*]. Horace! You must get me a cabin that has plenty of *air!*

PENDLETON [*stops on the stairs in meditation, barely hearing Mrs. Pendleton's instructions and giving automatic acquiescence to them*]. Yes.

MRS. PENDLETON [*from upstairs*]. And you must attend to our passports.

PENDLETON. Yes, yes.

MRS. PENDLETON. And for Harold and me a large letter of credit —

PENDLETON. Yes, yes, a vacation in the city — [*with a smile*] *alone!* [*He disappears up the stairs.*]

JANE [*puts her hand on Thomas's arm*]. Oh, Tom, *we* sure know more about the meaning of life than Mr. Pendleton will ever learn.

[*Thomas puts his arms about Jane and they go off into the adjoining room.*]

[*The clock strikes eight.*]

THE PLAY IS OVER

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